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TENSIONS AND MODELS IN GENERAL EDUCATION PLANNING

Robert R. Newton

A Perennial Planning Issue

Discussions of general education have become a permanent fixture in American higher education, reflecting the perennial struggle between general education and specialization. The undergraduate curriculum, originally a unified, common, prescribed program in virtually all colleges, has been eroded in various historical periods by the rise of electives, the need for specialized programs, and the emergence of new knowledge. As these centrifugal forces strengthened, periodic counterattacks were mounted by those who wished to restore unity and coherence in the form of a resuscitated core curriculum or general education program (Rudolph, 1977). The battlefield of undergraduate education is strewn with the skeletons of well-meaning but unsuccessful reformers who attempted to stem the tide of specialization in defense of general education. The revival of interest in general education over the past two decades is in part a recognition that the forces of departmentalization and specialization continue in the ascendancy and are advancing virtually unopposed; this recognition is to the dismay of those for whom breadth is the essential foundation of an effective undergraduate education (Association of American Colleges, 1985).

In spite of the extensive time and effort that continues to go into reexamining general education programs, frequently only a few members of blue ribbon general education reform committees are well prepared for the task. More often than not they have little background in the history of general education, insufficient understanding of the underlying pedagogical issues, or minimal acquaintance with competing models of general education.

A useful context would be one in which busy faculty, unfamiliar with general education trends, might understand the issues surrounding general education reform and the assumptions of competing models. This context would include:

- the tensions and issues which will likely emerge in a general education exploration,
- the competing models of general education a committee is likely to encounter both among its own members and in surveying the programs of other institutions, and
- an analysis of how the different models might fit into different kinds of institutions.

Four Tensions in General Education

Contemporary tensions that confront general education reformers involve four issues:

- unity versus fragmentation (*knowledge*),
- breadth versus depth (*student learning*),
- generalist versus specialist (*faculty competence*), and
- Western culture versus cultural diversity (*content*).

Knowledge

Reflection on the purposes of general education inevitably exposes a fundamental disagreement on the nature of a college or university. Some emphasize the clear distinctions embodied in the foci and methods of the different disciplines and see the university as a loose collection of sharply defined departments drawn together under a broad institutional mission. Others stress a unity and coherence in the pursuit of knowledge that transcends departmental divisions and view the university as a common enterprise based on a coherent set of widely accepted assumptions.

The former would expose students to many disciplines, and assume that students themselves will construct a coherent understanding of the world from these separate experiences. The latter

would design an integrated set of courses that brings together the disciplines either through blurring the lines among disciplines or insisting on a structure that promotes an underlying unity and greater coherence among general education courses. On the one hand, the emphasis on a broad sampling of the various disciplines reflects the rich, diverse interests and shape of a contemporary university, but it may suffer, as many complain the university itself does, from the defect of its virtue—fragmentation. On the other hand, striving for the realization of a genuine academic community based on shared interests, a common body of knowledge, and a concern for common problems may seek an elusive unity that has diminishing significance to an increasingly specialized and discipline-oriented faculty.

Student Learning

In the beginning, American colleges provided a broad common education for their students. This approach eroded over time because of three developments: the introduction of new disciplines, the enormous increase in the amount of knowledge, and the emphasis on faculty research and publication. These movements have resulted in a chronic tension between breadth and depth in undergraduate education, a tension usually resolved by further reduction of general education requirements to make additional room for courses in the major. In pre-professional undergraduate curricula especially, the prescriptions of outside accrediting agencies have left less and less room for general education or electives.

General education requirements are often viewed by students (and sometimes faculty advisors) as obstacles to be overcome as early as possible in their undergraduate careers in order to concentrate on what is genuinely important—the major. Though few would champion the cause of narrowness in undergraduate education, some argue that students, supported by an effective academic advisement system, should be allowed greater freedom to design programs based on their own talents and interests rather than be forced into predetermined general education requirements. They are skeptical whether, in the modern university and in contemporary society, there can be a common body of knowledge that every educated person should possess.

Faculty

The general education program is a reflection of a college faculty's perceptions, interests and ambitions. The rise of specialization and departmentalization has had a profound effect on faculty roles in leading universities nationwide. Primary identification and loyalty have shifted from the university to the professional specialty. The most significant reference group has become other members of one's discipline rather than one's university colleagues, and the department has supplanted the university as the primary source of authority and rewards. Researching teachers have been replaced by teaching researchers. Specialists with only passing interest in knowledge outside their disciplines have supplanted faculty who were not intimidated by involvement in integrative programs that took them beyond their specialties.

A view of the university as a set of separate schools or departments only loosely joined under a vague general purpose has pushed aside the perception of the university as an organic whole pursuing a common purpose. Departmental search committees more often than not seek narrow expertise with little concern whether the candidate is broadly educated or has an interest in general education. In such an environment, the concerns of general education are at the bottom of the list. With little attraction and few rewards for junior or senior faculty, especially in larger universities, general education courses have often become the domain of graduate students and part-time teachers. As university citizens retire, they are replaced by departmental members, and the importance and effective implementation of general education diminishes.

Content

In the contemporary controversy swirling around general education, no issue has been more passionately argued than the content of general education. The traditional importance of communicating the Western cultural heritage is challenged by those who demand expansion of general education to incorporate cultures and voices not represented in the canonical works and authors of the Western tradition.

Advocates of the centrality of Western culture argue that this tradition has been the dominant force in the development of American institutions and values and has had a major influence on the emergence of similar values in other cultures. They bemoan the cultural illiteracy of modern day college graduates and the curriculum's substitution of the contemporary issues for perennial concerns. Critics of Western cultural dominance in general education argue that it represents the disembodied ideas and values of an elite in one culture to the virtual exclusion of the contributions of other cultures or theoretical perspectives (Tierney, 1989). They propose that it is time for a radical revision of general education that emphasizes diversity and multicultural and gender concerns, not only to offer students a more balanced education, but also to prepare them to live in a world where an understanding of cultural differences will be essential for survival and success.

Models of General Education

In the midst of these tensions, general education programs are being examined, debated, and revised in colleges and universities across the country. The decentralized character of American higher education has meant and will continue to mean that there will be almost as many different general education programs as there are colleges—each responding to its own idiosyncratic history, organizational culture, and special mission. At the same time, if one emulates Procrustes and reduces the blurring detail and multiplicity of literally thousands of programs, certain illuminating assumptions and patterns emerge. Below are three approaches that I propose can provide a context for general education planning—both for understanding the nature of the current program and for envisioning how that program might be changed. The three models are the Great Books Model, the Scholarly Discipline Model, and the Effective Citizen Model.

Great Books Model

Proponents of the Great Books Model complain that the segregation of knowledge into discrete disciplines introduces artificial

divisions in the understanding of reality and the pursuit of knowledge. As the disciplines enforce fragmentation, so a general education curriculum that follows the disciplinary structure leaves the student with a general education that is disjointed and incoherent. Disciplines as such should recede into the background since genuinely important problems cannot be fully and effectively explored if chopped artificially into disciplinary pieces. Rather, the most effective general education takes an interdisciplinary approach. The focus of general education becomes not the latest ideas or discoveries of contemporary scholars but an in-depth historical review of the works of pivotal thinkers whose ideas changed human history.

The aim of education, right living, is neither vocational nor pragmatic. Encounters with works that have stood the test of time by raising questions central to human existence and striving confront students with the fundamental questions of life, questions that have and will continue to preoccupy and perplex humanity at all times and in all places. In exploration of the tradition, students develop the intellectual habits, interests, and values that enable and insure the preservation and advancement of their cultural heritage (Association of American Colleges, 1985; Bennett, 1984; Bloom, 1987; Cheney, 1989; Hutchins, 1936).

Knowledge

The Great Books Model offers a clear position on the four tensions described above. Unity of knowledge is prized, while the fragmentation introduced by a disciplinary approach is eschewed. Reminiscent of early American colleges, the general education program reduces the blur of the knowledge explosion by focusing on a common body of universally accepted works that represent the essence of the students' cultural heritage. Coherence is further supported by the historical arrangement of the curriculum.

Student Learning

Emphasis is on the breadth of student learning while avoiding premature concentration on one discipline. Students are allowed to immerse themselves in specialized learning only after they possess the broader context provided by an integrated general education curriculum. They confront problems simultaneously in all their complexity rather than serially and from the disjointed perspec-

tives of independent disciplines. Students are active learners, immersed in the careful reading and rigorous discussion of the classic texts themselves rather than the study of textbooks that repackage the insights of the classical authors.

Faculty

The competence of the faculty in a Great Books Model is broad rather than specialized. Faculty are at ease with the classic works of Western civilization and, as broadly educated scholars, are willing to step outside their home disciplines. They are committed to the premise that general education should concentrate on fundamental human questions rather than narrower and more artificial disciplinary concepts and methods. Usually such programs require a high level of cooperation among faculty—both for initial and ongoing curriculum and for faculty development.

Content

The content of the Great Books Model emphasizes the universality of the questions raised in the classics of Western culture and maintains the importance of the canon. At the very least, the study of other traditions or perspectives and critical evaluation of the Western tradition should follow a thorough acquaintance with the ideas and values that, whatever their strengths and weaknesses, are the basis of the culture in which we live. Great Books advocates have sometimes responded to the challenge of multiculturalism by devising supplementary courses that focus on the great books of other cultures.

The Great Books Model often flourishes in small liberal arts colleges where specialization and departmentalization are less pronounced. Programs also emerge in enclaves within larger institutions where reform-minded faculty have rejected the view of education implicit in overspecialization and excessive emphasis on research. Great Books programs have been established for whole curricula; in other settings, Great Books courses stand, usually in the humanities, as a required or alternative sequence for part of the general education curriculum. Among the more publicized recent proposals of the Great Books Model are Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy* (Bennett, 1984) and the National Endowment for the Humanities' *50 Hours* proposal (Cheney, 1989).

Scholarly Discipline Model

Advocates of the Scholarly Discipline Model complain that Great Books Model approaches look backwards to an era when knowledge was less voluminous, specialized methods of inquiry were less developed, and mastery in more than one field was more attainable. The Scholarly Discipline Model proposes that general education should be basically an introduction to the disciplines that comprise and give shape to the college. Today, the amount of knowledge and level of sophistication required for serious achievement in any scholarly area requires a concentration and specialization possible only through dedication to a single discipline. Faculty who stray into areas where they lack specialized training risk an amateurism they would be quick to condemn if intruders without disciplinary expertise invaded their disciplines.

The scholarly disciplines are the storehouses of human knowledge and the ways which humanity has developed over the centuries to understand the world. The organization of the university into disciplines mirrors this intellectual heritage and supports its ongoing development. General education should be derived from and draw on the strength of the disciplines. Consequently, the strongest general education is comprised of a series of rigorous introductory courses in the disciplines. General education teachers are specialists in the discipline and the content of courses emphasizes the insights and methods of the best contemporary scholars in the discipline (Phenix, 1964; Bruner, 1960).

Knowledge

The emphasis of the Scholarly Discipline Model is less on the coherence and unity of knowledge as it is on a series of intensive experiences in discrete disciplines. The source of integration is not a blending of the substance of the different disciplines but the students themselves who, with a solid grounding in the fundamental concepts and scholarly methods of the individual disciplines, can reflectively make their own connections.

Student Learning

The curriculum emphasizes both breadth and depth through an intensive introduction to a wide range of basic disciplines. The

general education course is not a watered down presentation *about* the discipline for nonspecialists, but a rigorous introduction to the discipline designed to make even students who will not specialize in the discipline understand its basic concepts and how the scholars in the discipline analyze and solve problems. The student emerges from the general education program with a solid knowledge of the most important disciplines and an intelligent grasp of the way scholars discover knowledge in these disciplines. Their concentration in a particular discipline in their majors is enhanced by the intensive introduction they have received in a variety of disciplines.

Faculty

Scholarly Discipline faculty are specialists committed primarily to their disciplines and to the expansion of knowledge in these disciplines. While recognizing the value of a broad-based general education, they respect the integrity of the other disciplines and the special expertise of scholars in other fields. They are reluctant to venture outside the discipline and are often suspicious of those who, in an era when knowledge is increasingly complex and specialized, claim to be generalists. The level of cooperation among faculty of different disciplines is minimal since the basic assumption is that general education courses in the different disciplines are independently planned and executed. Once the disciplines to be included in the general education program are determined, scholars within departments decide what should be taught.

Content

In the debate between Western culture and cultural diversity, Scholarly Discipline proponents reject both sides. The content of courses should be the best contemporary understanding of the key concepts and their interrelationship in a discipline. If, in certain disciplines, this principle leads to the incorporation of the classic authors or concepts of Western civilization or the addition of other voices not given adequate attention in the past, then their inclusion is based on the merit and importance of their contributions to the discipline rather than the need either to be faithful to the tradition or to be more inclusive.

The Scholarly Discipline approach is at home in larger, complex universities with strong departments with a commitment to

research and with hiring and promotion practices that encourage specialization. The Scholarly Discipline approach, controlled in large measure by the departments, usually results in a set of distribution requirements that spreads the general education program across disciplines. In some instances, the distribution requirements rigorously implement a commitment to communicating the key concepts and methods of inquiry of the disciplines that underlies the Scholarly Discipline approach; in other cases, the distribution program may represent a political compromise rather than a pedagogical position and may be simply acceptable lists of courses from competing departments.

Effective Citizen Model

Proponents of the third approach, the Effective Citizen Model, argue that the Scholarly Discipline approach focuses more on the university's ivory tower than the demanding and rapidly changing society into which students will graduate. Both the preoccupation of the Scholarly Discipline advocates to turn out beginning practitioners of the disciplines and the nostalgic attempts of Great Books advocates to resuscitate an early American collegiate ideal are misguided. These models reflect more the interests of college faculties than the needs of contemporary students or of a modern democratic society.

The primary question is what kind of general education is required to live well and participate fully in the world of the 21st century. The general education curriculum is that special component of undergraduate education providing the comprehensive context for more specialized study in the major and for further exploration of knowledge through electives. General education courses are not introductions for those who will major in the discipline; rather, they are special offerings aimed at students who will likely have minimal additional formal coursework in these disciplines. Courses are designed to communicate relevant information, to spell out its implications for life in modern society, and to develop the skills and values required for effective citizenship.

Knowledge

Coherence and unity in the Effective Citizen Model are promoted by building the curriculum around the issues and problems gradu-

ates will be expected to confront in order to lead productive lives. The curriculum is drawn from the disciplines because the disciplines contain the knowledge future citizens will require. But rather than, for example, giving students a rigorous introduction to basic chemistry, a general education course should develop an understanding of what chemistry is, how it interprets and shapes the modern world, and what critical challenges it poses to humanity. The objective is not to train a scientist but to educate graduates with the scientific literacy essential to be effective citizens.

Student Learning

General education should address a coherent and relatively comprehensive set of questions and issues so that graduates possess a general understanding of their world, its problems and opportunities. The emphasis is on a broad understanding of the important ideas and approaches of the disciplines and their societal implications rather than on an in-depth introduction to the discipline more appropriate to specialists. Students do not learn the discipline as much as they learn *about* the discipline and its importance both in modern society and for them as citizens of the next century.

Faculty

In the Effective Citizen Model, faculty set aside their preoccupation with training neophyte practitioners of their disciplines and develop courses intended for nonspecialists, in which relevancy and societal implications are pivotal concerns. The faculty recognize that, while committed to producing well-trained specialists in their majors, their obligation to the student body in general requires them to play a quite different, though also important role: educating informed citizens. In some instances, general education courses in this model remain within the discipline; in others, general education courses may be interdisciplinary, constructed around themes like “living in a social context” or “living in a scientific and technological world.”

Content

The substance of general education in the Effective Citizen Model is significantly influenced by the debate over the canon of Western culture and cultural diversity. Preparation of students for today’s world, and even more for tomorrow’s, demands that the

curriculum reflect the multicultural reality of American and global society. Courses should not only raise neglected issues of cultural and gender diversity but also promote the attitudes and values needed to address societal problems in these areas. Today's graduates will be ill prepared for the future if they graduate lacking an understanding and experience of cultures significantly different from their own.

There are two variations of this model worth noting. First, the recent emphasis on competencies and learning outcomes promoted by the assessment movement can give a particular character to the Effective Citizen Model. In this context, the goal of effective citizenship is defined in terms of a series of specific competencies necessary for productive membership in society. Sharp articulation of the objectives and careful assessment of outcomes are at the center of a competency-based interpretation of the Effective Citizen Model (Hutchings, Marchese, & Wright, 1991).

Second, the Effective Citizenship Model can be interpreted in the philosophical tradition of Dewey, for whom the aim of education was not to produce graduates who would fit into the existing society but to develop individuals who would emerge from their education with the skills, habits of inquiry, and attitudes they needed to change society for the better (Childs, 1950; Cremin, 1961; Dewey, 1916). In this view, colleges prepare graduates for their civic responsibility to rediscover, reorganize, and remake their democratic society.

The Effective Citizen Model can emerge in a variety of settings, such as comprehensive universities or small colleges. The model requires a varying level of cooperation and coordination among faculty, dependent on whether the courses remain within a particular discipline or merge material from various disciplines. In either case, courses must be reworked for a more comprehensive clientele and, since relevancy is emphasized, regularly reformulated as student or societal needs change. College-wide commitment to the Effective Citizen Model is required, as is cooperation within and, in the case of interdisciplinary courses, among departments to select the content and experiences appropriate for the nonspecialist.

Different General Education Programs for Different Settings

As noted at the outset, controversy over general education is a reflection of different perceptions of the nature of a university. Few would disagree that the decentralization of American higher education and the resulting myriad initiatives and idiosyncratic institutional histories has promoted great diversity. Local community colleges and international research universities are both institutions of higher learning, yet they differ dramatically in mission, goals, norms, values, faculties, clienteles, organizational structures, levels of faculty or administrative control, and complexity of organization. The differences among the 3,600 institutions of higher education emerge clearly in the design of general education programs.

In some institutions, the dominant metaphor is the university as a community of scholars that introduces the new generation to their cultural heritage and that trains and inspires them to advance this heritage. In other institutions, the metaphor is that of an educational service center, part of the higher education industry, providing the knowledge and skills that the individual and society need.

The characteristics of the student body and the degree to which the institution is explicitly oriented towards serving the career aspirations of its students will influence the design of its general education program. Students seeking a traditional college education will be attracted to colleges with Great Books or Scholarly Discipline models. Students more oriented toward careers will be less patient with Great Books and Scholarly Discipline approaches. They would likely be better served with a variation of the Effective Citizen Model.

Faculty are a key determinant of the appropriate model of general education for their institution. Faculty hired with the expectation of strong research productivity in their disciplines will be reluctant to adopt a model that distracts them from their disciplines by requiring teaching outside their home departments. It is also unlikely that the universities hiring such faculty will expect them to teach outside their specialties. Further, some faculty will reject the concept of courses for nonspecialists as a betrayal of standards and mission. On the other hand, faculty in colleges or

universities whose mission and programs are more sensitive to the changing societal needs and clienteles will likely be more responsive to the “real world” concerns of their students. Courses will be more heavily influenced by students’ aspirations than by a predetermined notion or ideal of what should be learned. General education in “traditional” universities whose programs change slowly will differ from general education in more “entrepreneurial” institutions that constantly scan the environment for emerging needs, opportunities, and clienteles.

Colleges differ in their need and their ability to establish an explicit sense of integration in general education, whether it be by blending the content in interdisciplinary courses, creating a special set of general education courses different from regular departmental courses, or insisting on a common form or structure for all general education courses. Small colleges where the whole faculty can fit into a modest auditorium have more of a chance to develop models that require substantial faculty planning, agreement, and coordination. Enclaves within larger institutions may separate themselves to establish special working groups to develop more coherent general education sequences. Larger universities may see explicit integration as unattainable or may devise a “common approach” that both conceptually and in practice pursues greater integration by establishing a common structure for general education courses, without forcing faculty to leave their disciplines.

Though the three models are presented above as distinct, the implementation of any particular general education program is likely to be an eclectic process with elements of the three models being selected in idiosyncratic ways by different faculty and departments. In a number of universities, Great Books programs for certain disciplines may be mixed with departmental programs that involve no interdisciplinary thrust. Some departments may build their courses around the Scholarly Discipline Model, while others in the same institution promote the Effective Citizen Model. Variation within universities is likely to be a function of the strength of the departments vis-à-vis university-wide governance structure and the willingness to commit resources to a general education program rather than to strengthening departmental programs.

Even though the models may have different assumptions, pedagogical approaches, and perceptions of the ideal graduate, that does not mean their implementation will exclude entirely the concerns of the other models. Great Books advocates might argue that developing a familiarity with the perennial questions is the best way to produce effective citizens. Scholarly Discipline proponents may incorporate classical authors and historical development of the discipline as essential components of their general education courses. Effective Citizen advocates may argue that life in modern society requires an understanding of relevance of the key concepts of the disciplines. So it is likely that each model, while sufficiently different to represent a distinct approach, will in varying ways seek to incorporate aspects of the two other models.

Finally, the models define the ideally educated person in different ways. The graduate of the Great Books program is familiar with the classical works and authors of Western culture (and perhaps other cultures) and has grappled with perennial questions of human existence. The Scholarly Discipline graduate has become a beginning practitioner of the basic disciplines and understands both the key concepts and the methods of inquiry scholars use in these disciplines. The Effective Citizen graduate is familiar with the important ideas of the disciplines and their implications for contemporary society and is prepared to live in and work for the improvement of it.

Summary Conclusion

The initial premise of this presentation was that general education revision committees are more often than not unprepared for their task. To provide a broad, albeit preliminary, context for general education planners, this analysis identified four key issues confronting reformers, outlined three models of general education, proposed how these models respond to the four issues, and described the factors that might make the various models more appropriate for different types of institutions (see table 1).

Though the decentralization of American education promotes idiosyncratic rather than uniform general education programs, these models provide relatively coherent sets of assumptions

Table 1. *Three Models of General Education*

	Great Books	Scholarly Discipline	Effective Citizen
Key insight	Focus on the perennial human questions	Disciplines as the accumulated wisdom and ways of understanding the world humankind has developed over the centuries	Education in the service of self-reforming democracy
Role of the university	Handing on the tradition	Vigorous developer/extender of the knowledge and methods of the academic disciplines	Progressive force for democratic change
Substance of curriculum	Pivotal ideas/ authors of Western tradition	Key concepts and methods of inquiry as defined by the disciplines	Knowledge/skills vital to living in and improving modern society
Ideal graduate	Classically educated through encounters with classic works and authors	Beginning practitioner of the disciplines	An effective citizen
Emphasis	Unity	Method	Action
Breadth/ depth	Broad review of the substance of the Western tradition	Sharp introduction to the range of basic disciplines	Comprehensive introduction to current knowledge
Source of coherence	Unified by a historical review of key responses to the perennial questions	The individual student piecing together the mosaic of the disciplines	The focus on preparing graduates with skills/ knowledge for modern society
Faculty	Broadly educated generalists	Disciplinary experts	Instructors committed to educate nonspecialists in their areas of specialty
Likely locations	Liberal arts colleges/special programs in larger universities	Research-oriented universities with strong departments	Institutions with strong client-centered orientation and sense of public mission
Orientation	Looks to past for enduring ideas and values to form and guide students in the present	Instills an understanding of the intellectual treasures and scholarly methods that are society's intellectual heritage	Develops the tools and commitment needed to shape the future
Inspiration/ advocates	Hutchins/ Adler/Bennett Cheney/Bloom	Bruner/Phenix/ professional disciplinary societies	Dewey/Childs

around which general education programs can and have been conceptualized, implemented, and assessed. A familiarity with these models can also provide a context against which the institution's current general education program can be analyzed and evaluated and can allow general education reformers to identify more sharply and quickly both their own presuppositions and the assumptions of their colleagues.

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