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# Revising General Education: A Chance to Be Bold

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**BY W. TAYLOR REVELEY IV**  
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Over the last generation or so, the process of revising general education—the path of courses every student must take regardless of major—has proven dispiriting and divisive on many campuses. Departments, feeling trapped in a zero-sum game for students and faculty, jockey for secure spots in the curricular order. For board members, curriculum approval is a naturally fraught area, where the shared governance roles of faculty and trustees can collide.

The biggest losers are students, who increasingly face a menu of required courses with little coherence, a pointless maze to navigate—not a memorable and signature feature of their college education.



But at this time of real stress on American higher education, it is imperative that general education become stronger.

At Longwood University, where I arrived as president in 2013, our board unanimously approved last fall a bold new “academic core curriculum” that will replace a smorgasbord of course requirements with a simple but rigorous three-level structure. The new core curriculum will expose students to a variety of disciplines, and it is deeply rooted in our mission of shaping “citizen leaders” for the challenging work of democratic life.

At every institution, the culture and mission vary, and the end product of a general education revision naturally will, too. But here are some key ingredients to a process from which an institution can emerge genuinely stronger.

- *Take time, and build consensus.* Getting general education right is almost certainly, in the long run, as important as anything else taking place at your institution. The time spent to give everyone a say, to work through challenges, and to assemble a product that has real buy-in is worthwhile many times over. Our faculty core curriculum committee began meeting in 2013 for several hours a week every week for two years. There were countless workshops, drafts, and revisions. Sometimes it felt very slow. But the final proposal passed our faculty senate 22–3, and our board unanimously. That consensus will carry real weight moving forward.
- *A board and president should provide vision and encouragement, not work in the weeds.* At Longwood, I made sure the committee understood my vision for the kind of place I wanted us to be: embracing our 178-year history as a liberal-arts institution, with a focus on residential learning, and developing citizens and leaders. At every meeting, I offered encouragement to keep that mission as their north star, and to “think big,” insisting only that the result be clear, coherent, and distinctive to Longwood.
- *Regular progress reports to the board.* Longwood’s board saw a presentation, and asked questions, at virtually every meeting throughout the process. This ensured there were no surprises (and was particularly important for new board appointees). Board members also offered useful feedback from their own work and life experiences, and, through their questions, signaled to faculty issues of potential concern.
- *Build foundations for its success across the university.* At Longwood, that opportunity presented itself in being chosen to host the 2016 Vice Presidential Debate. Faculty responded by creating or revising more than 30 courses to incorporate themes of the election and debate. In practice, these became the first pilot courses for the new curriculum, and added to our momentum. And there has been special care to involve other parts of the university—in particular, student affairs—in the curriculum conversation.

In short, the recipe is not a surprising one: patience, commitment, and communication. At this challenging juncture in so many dimensions, our work has never been more ambitious, or urgent. Reforming general education is an opportunity for the public and politicians either to confirm their most cynical suspicions about higher education or to see us assert with confidence the substance and value of what we offer. Let it be the latter.

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W. Taylor Reveley IV is the president of Longwood University.

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