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General Education Reform: Five Suggestions from the Front Lines

by Michael Austin [Newman University] in Education Jul 24, 2013

Yesterday, I complained that the general education curriculum in the United States was broken, but (as more than a few people have pointed out) I did not offer more than a few vague generalities about how to fix it. Partly this is because diagnosing a problem is a lot easier than actually doing anything about it. All pundits know this very well. But, for me, it was also a case of having much more to say on the topic than a 650-word blog post could ever hope to capture.

But now I have TWO 650-word blog posts. That changes everything.

When the university that I am affiliated with set out to change its general education core, we started with a few basic principles. These were starting points rather than ending positions. The beauty of good theories never completely survives the buffetings of tight schedules, course-heavy majors, limited resources, and imperfect human beings. Nonetheless, starting points guide processes, and our results bear the indelible stamp of their origins. So, by way of suggestion, and as a report from the front lines, here are five design principles that, in my experience, can lead to the kind of general studies curriculum capable of addressing some of higher education's most serious problems.

1. The general studies core should be as well designed and integrated as any major course of study. I cannot stress this enough. Colleges and universities know how to create coherent, well-integrated courses of study, with specific learning objectives, courses that build on one another, and a reasonable balance between requirements and electives. This is what majors are. Somehow, however, we lose all of our program-building knowledge when we design general education programs—which almost always trade away established best practices for entrenched positions, colliding political interests, and Solomon-like compromises where the baby gets split in two.

In theory, it should not be difficult to design a well-coordinated, 42-45 hour academic program that prepares students in critical thinking, problem solving, and communication, while, at the same time, emphasizing liberal learning and general cultural literacy. In practice, this has been all but impossible to achieve for reasons that have nothing to do with a lack of knowledge or a paucity of good models to follow.

2. Students should take general studies courses every semester that they are in college. The traditional segmentation of a college career—two years of general education and two years of major study—works against the conception of the core curriculum a serious educational experience. “Gen-eds” are all too often considered obstacles to serious study—things to be tested out of, transferred in, or gotten out of the way so that “real college” can start. A serious and intentional general education program must, I believe, engage students throughout their college careers.

3. Everybody should teach in the core. Most universities acknowledge that “the faculty own the core,” but, in all but a handful of them, teaching in the general education program is limited to the traditional arts and sciences disciplines. I think that we miss a great opportunity when we do not involve all faculty, in all disciplines, in the core curriculum. General education is supposed to be interdisciplinary. And disciplines like business, education, engineering, nursing, and allied health have ideas, and knowledge, and ways of thinking that a genuine core curriculum cannot do without. There are plenty of creative ways to make this happen.

It is not necessary to require everybody to take one course in everything. At Newman, we ended up creating a series of team taught interdisciplinary seminars for upper-division students (True Story: I am working this summer with a nursing professor on a course called “The Literature of Death and Dying.”) That’s one way to do it, but there are many others. The core curriculum should be something that everybody has a stake in and feels a part of.

4. Core courses should be taught in the most attractive learning environments that a college offers. No matter what they say in their catalogs, most schools value major courses much more than they value core courses. You can tell this by the way that resources get distributed. General education courses are almost always taught in huge lecture halls or by inexperienced graduate students or overworked adjunct professors. What would happen if we reversed this? What if general education courses were taught at the most attractive times, in small classrooms, and with the most experienced teachers and scholars on campus? That is the sort of thing that one might expect from a program that everybody on campus took seriously and held in high regard—which is what “core curriculum” actually means.

5. Teaching and designing general education courses should be an important part of faculty evaluation, tenure, and promotion. Colleges work just the same as everything else: you get more of what you reward and less of what you ignore. And the reward structure in most institutions of higher education is pretty straightforward: First, high-profile grants and cutting-edge scholarship; Second, a national profile in your discipline; Third, service on major university committees; Occasionally, teaching within the major. Teaching, designing, and writing about general education courses doesn’t even make the list, which is why many full-time faculty members spend as little time as they can participating in the core curriculum.

These are my suggestions. Collectively, they form a single argument with a single rationale: if colleges and universities mean what we say about the importance of critical thinking, communication, liberal education, and life-long learning, we will do a better job of creating programs that teach these things to all students, regardless of their major. And we will make sure that those programs have as many resources and as much institutional prestige as any major course of study.

Would this require a fundamental reexamination of what higher education is and how it relates to our society? Yes, it would. We well-educated critical thinkers are supposed to be good at that sort of thing.