The Contextual Significance of General Education in Higher Education

GENERAL EDUCATION IS widely touted as an enduring distinctive of higher education in the United States (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; Boyer, 1987; Gaston, 2015; Zakaria, 2014). The notion that undergraduate education demands wide-ranging knowledge is a hallmark of U.S. college graduates that international educators emulate (Blumenstyk, 2015; Rhodes, 2010b; Tsui, 2012). The veracity of this distinct educational vision is supported by the fact that approximately one third of the typically 120 credits required for the bachelor's degree in the United States consist of general education courses (Lattuca & Stark, 2014). Realizing a general education has been understood to be central to achieving higher education's larger purposes, making it a particularly salient concern.

General Education's Interconnection With Higher Education's Purpose

General education's significance is evident in recent calls to reinvigorate higher education (Bok, 2005, 2013; Delbanco, 2012; DeMillo, 2011; Keeling & Hersh, 2012; Keller, 2008; Menand, 2010; Roth, 2014). General education overlaps with foundational queries as to why students attend college,

including whether higher education is essentially about gaining knowledge, developing skills, or advancing democratic outcomes (De Vise, 2011; Menand, 2010). Assumptions regarding the purposes of higher education are vast and various; the point here is that general education is entangled with divergent assumptions regarding higher education's purpose. This intersection not only complicates general education but also lies at the center of why it matters.

General education is at the epicenter of a critical firestorm facing higher education. General education is implicated in critique regarding the quality of what college students learn (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Donoghue, 2008; Hacker & Dreifus, 2010; Selingo, 2013). Keeling and Hersh (2012) relate the discontent regarding college learning on the whole to general education specifically:

> *[C]ollege learning is advanced and strengthened by exposure to the greatest possible diversity of ideas, people, and learning experiences, inside and outside the classroom. The much-maligned general education programs required of most undergraduates might address this opportunity if they were far more carefully designed, implemented, and assessed: as it is, most general education is disconnected, unchallenging, and boring. Neither students nor institutions invest much in it. No wonder students so often hate it, and no wonder it so seldom achieves its goals (p. 47).*

Keeling and Hersh (2012) illustrate just a few of the wide range of expectations for general education: General education is expected to expose students to a diverse array of ideas, incorporate curricular and cocurricular experiences, provide a space of connection, offer intellectual challenge, and be exciting to boot.

Differing interpretations open general education to various evaluative contexts. Some argue that it is about introducing "basic subjects," such as literature, history, mathematics, and foreign languages. From this vantage point, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (2010) has voiced a strong critique giving three out of five institutions a C or worse in general education. Another standpoint is that college graduates should hold in common certain "fundamental skills." Related to this perspective, Arum and Roksa (2011)

have brought widespread attention to general education by bemoaning inadequacies in college learning in "critical thinking, complex reasoning and written communication" (p. 121). Another viewpoint is that of "essential texts," such as great books or great ideas. Lewis (2006) has argued that higher education falls short in its responsibility to ensure that students attain "common knowledge" and "shared experience" that inform a "particular point of view from which they will have all seen the products of civilization" (p. 61).

General education is also implicated in much of the broader criticism facing higher education. Critiques revolve around the lack of attention to questions of meaning (Kronman, 2007). Concerns have also been voiced regarding fragmentation within the educational experience as well as a disconnect between the academy and the societal context (Taylor, 2010). These concerns also imply the expected contributions of general education and influence viewpoints regarding general education's value.

In addition to being interwoven with higher education broadly in terms of educational content, general education has widespread significance in that it impacts colleges and universities at many levels. General education is implicated in systemic-level and educational policy debates. It crosses institutional contexts (Allen, 2006; Finkelstein, 2005; Penn, 2011b; Shoenberg, 2005). All six regional accrediting bodies identify standards for effectiveness in general education (Higher Learning Association, 2015; Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2006; New England Association of Schools and Colleges, 2011; North Central Association, 2015; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2012; Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2013). Finally, general education impacts and is impacted by tenure and promotion policies, academic and student affairs collaboration, and educational ethos. These broad influences open general education to a wide range of opinion regarding its purpose (or lack thereof).

There is grave concern regarding the state of general education, although such apprehension is not new. Concern regarding general education has been raised at multiple points in higher education's history (Carnochan, 1993; Kanter, Gamson, & London, 1997; Rudolph, 1977). Ernest L. Boyer (1988) decried general education to be the "neglected stepchild of the undergraduate experience" (p. 2); he pointedly characterized it as the "spare room of academic

life" in that it is "chronically in a state ranging from casual neglect to serious disrepair" (Boyer, 1981b, p. 3). Johnson and Ratcliff (2004) referenced coherent general education as an "unfinished agenda" (p. 85). While the reality that general education faces daunting challenges is not new, the particularities are new with each era.

The various evaluative and pragmatic contexts that influence general education make it vulnerable to confusion in times of stability. In times of rapid and consequential change, general education faces even greater attention to concerns of purpose (Fong, 2013).

General Education and the Current Context

Higher education in the United States is enmeshed in a time of radical change and considerable unrest (Fong, 2013; Selingo, 2013; Taylor, 2010). The forces that dominate higher education in the present are centrifugal (Delbanco, 2012; Taylor, 2010, Wells, 2015b). That is to say, social forces are pulling colleges and universities in disaggregated directions and "unbundling" the very idea of higher education (Selingo, 2013). These forces have real implications for general education.

New patterns in college attendance force colleges and universities to reconsider general education and its methods of delivery. Increasing numbers of students attend multiple institutions en route to the baccalaureate degree, either by transferring between institutions or through dual-enrollment programs in which students take college courses while simultaneously completing high school coursework (Allen, 2006; Selingo, 2013). A number of students enroll in college coursework at two or more institutions within the same academic year (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014). The dominant mode for completing an undergraduate degree is no longer the purview of a single institution in which students complete all their requirements at the same college over the course of 4 years.

Student mobility has implications for curricular policy (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014). For example, if general education requirements are front-loaded in the first and second college years, the increasing number

of students who fulfill undergraduate requirements through transfer or dual-enrollment programs may sidestep the very experiences the institutions have articulated to be common to their graduates. New patterns in attendance also have financial implications, in that colleges and universities sometimes rely on the tuition income of general education course enrollments to offset the costs of other programs (Blumenstyk, 2015). When general education requirements are fulfilled through transfer credits, a source of tuition income is diverted as well. Beyond student mobility, general education is implicated in current concerns over the value and affordability of a college education.

As policy makers consider new ways to make higher education more affordable, the credits required for general education are scrutinized more stringently. Heightened attention to return on investment and economic utility places strict evaluative frames upon general education (Bennett & Wilezol, 2013). Three-year degree programs that often limit general education have gained attention (Gaston, 2010; Jaschik, 2009). Competency-based degrees, in which students are awarded credit for demonstrating knowledge of material as opposed to completing credit-based courses, also raise new queries for general education (Blumenstyk, 2015). As cost concerns take center stage, general education faces new challenges regarding its contribution to higher education's purposes.

The movement toward greater accountability also raises questions about general education (Rhodes, 2010a). Colleges and universities face vociferous calls to clarify and fulfill their mission to individuals and to society (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The insistence from the public and accrediting agencies that colleges and universities specify their goals and document their achievement impacts educational practice (Schneider & Shoenberg, 1998). Institutional accountability concerns are exacerbated in a context where students devalue general education.

General education faces serious challenges in an environment where students see general education as something to get out of the way (Aveni, 2014). Attaining skills and knowledge for a career far outweighs gaining a "well-rounded general education" among students (Eagan, Lozano, Hurtado, & Case, 2014). Moreover, viewing general education as an unnecessary hurdle makes it at best a lost opportunity and at worst particularly vulnerable in

today's resource-limited, accountability-laden context. Examining general education within broader concerns about higher education points to a daunting but opportune task facing general education in the present.

General Education: Many Meanings, Multiple Functions

One often-articulated ideal of general education is that there is something or some set of things that college and university graduates should hold in common; however, the basis for that commonness is anything but shared. Whereas some consider general education to mean skills and abilities, others endow general education with specific content. Still others equate general education with particular academic disciplines. Recent articulations have framed general education to be a set of learning outcomes (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007; Penn, 2011a, 2011b). Differing perspectives not only make it challenging to consider the significance of general education but also open it up to a wide range of determinations regarding its effectiveness.

General education is made particularly complex by the various lenses that proponents and critics alike have used to frame its significance. Discussion regarding general education has long been "hampered by a pervasive sense of confusion over the meaning of the term *general education*" (italics in original) (Miller, 1988, p. 3). Bastedo's (2002) assertion that there is "little consensus in higher education today on what general education is or should be" (p. 273) reflected a long history of confusion and remains true today. Lack of consensus further complicates the formidable challenge of general education renewal (Gaston & Gaff, 2009; Hanstedt, 2012).

Scholars and educational practitioners ascribe countless aims to general education and, in doing so, evoke a host of related but not entirely synonymous terms, including but not limited to liberal education, liberal arts, liberal learning, core curriculum, and common learning. Thus, any comprehensive examination of general education depends on some attentiveness to definition.

However, no unanimous term exists to guide comprehension of general education (nor a sense of whether we are achieving it) and in what ways it is distinct from or overlaps with various other curricular elements, such as the major and electives, and cocurricular programs. While consensus on general education is unrealistic, this monograph aims to clarify terms associated with general education in order to lend support to those seeking to advance both the conceptual and the pragmatic aims of general education.

In this monograph, I use the term "general education" to reference education that undergraduate students across academic disciplines share in common, both within and beyond institutional contexts. General education comprises a variety of philosophical ideals and is manifested in a variety of forms. As such, general education is an organizing concept that frames the fulfillment of mission and prescribes particular lenses for curriculum and pedagogy while simultaneously encompassing a wide variety of philosophical ideals, curricular models, and learning activities.

Lack of consensus, fueled by general education's complex history, which is detailed in the next chapter, has influenced the widespread use of several related terms and concepts. Providing a basic idea of related terms is one avenue for enhancing clarity; in order to know what general education is, one must recognize how it differs from and overlaps with related concepts. An exhaustive determination of each of the terms related to general education is beyond the scope of this monograph. The point of illustrating several brief descriptions is to help readers differentiate general education from a host of closely related concepts but also to appreciate how closely these terms relate to general education. Clarity of terms combined with a deep appreciation for complexity is requisite to effectively navigating general education. The following terms exemplify the range of terminology that is typically uttered in general education–related conversations.

- *Liberal arts.* The term "liberal arts" finds its origins in the concept of *artes liberalis*, defined literally as the arts befitting a free human being. In the context of U.S. higher education, this ideal initially was composed of seven liberal arts. The first three, framed as the *trivium*, focused on cultivating an appreciation for language: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. To these

were added the *quadrivium* focusing on the mathematical-physical arts: geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy (Glyler & Weeks, 1998; Roche, 2010). The connection of the idea of the liberal arts to general education stems from this inheritance but also relates to the manner of delivering many general education programs. In many colleges and universities, study of the liberal arts is synonymous with the required elements of an undergraduate curriculum, in which students must enroll in courses reflecting a variety of subject areas, such as literature, history, science, mathematics, natural philosophy, religion, fine arts, and foreign language (Bastedo, 2002; Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Engagement with the subject areas traditionally referred to as the "liberal arts" disciplines[1] is a means of achieving the aims of a general education program.

- *Liberal education.*[2] Liberal education draws on the idea of a free or "liberating" education consistent with the liberal arts (Cronon, 1998); liberal education reflects a philosophy of education whereas the concept of liberal arts points to subject areas (Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d.). Perhaps no other confluence of terminology creates as much confusion as the relationship between liberal education and general education. Some have argued that liberal education and general education are fundamentally different (Boyer, 1987; Boyer & Levine, 1981; Flexner, 1908; Miller, 1988; Van Doren, 1943). Others have argued that the two are one and the same (Harvard University Committee, 1945; Hutchins, 1936; Meiklejohn, 1922; Thomas, 1962). Still others have contended that the concepts mean the same thing but that liberal education is a more accurate reflection of general education in a particular time and social context (Hanstedt, 2012; President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947). A generative distinction is that liberal education references an educational ideal whereas general education is a curricular model established as a means of achieving it (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015).
- *Common learning.* The phrase "common learning" has also been used to reference general education, sometimes referring to the whole of general education and sometimes in part. Ernest L. Boyer used the term interchangeably with general education; this application is consistent with his philosophical formulation of general education as the "learning that should be

common to all people" (Boyer, 1981a, ix) precisely because it was grounded in "common experience" (Boyer, 1982a, 1982b). Cohen and Kiskar (2010) suggest that "one of the more lasting definitions [of general education] is that all students should gain a common body of knowledge so that they can take their place as members of a community with shared understandings" (p. 154). Common learning can be variously defined to mean everything from common content, as in the same texts or courses being engaged by all students, to common learning objectives, as in all students developing similar competencies, such as verbal and written communication. Common learning, like liberal education, is a broad and complex philosophical ideal for which general education is a means.

- *Core curriculum*. As is the case with common learning, core curriculum is often used interchangeably with general education. However, a more accurate definition of a core curriculum is a tightly structured and often interdisciplinary series of prescribed courses intended to ensure that students gain a common foundation of knowledge (Bastedo, 2002; Lattuca & Stark, 2014). The core curriculum is a specific design for achieving general education, one that emphasizes the design of a set of interdisciplinary required courses as opposed to a distribution requirement where a general education is achieved by exposure to a variety of subjects.

Across these terms, general education is a means to achieving varied aims of higher education. As such, general education encapsulates a variety of forms and diverse ideas regarding its content. At the same time, general education represents a way of framing a philosophical ideal that reflects something valuable about an education that empowers individuals and gets at something bigger than any single academic discipline.

Purpose and Organization of Monograph

This monograph addresses some of the consequential questions surrounding general education today, focusing on the 4-year college or university context.[3] The central purpose of this text is to sharpen understanding of the complex

picture of general education in U.S. higher education and, by extension, to illuminate avenues for realizing and sustaining purposeful general education programs.

Toward this end, this monograph provides a comprehensive overview of general education's functions in higher education today. This overview clarifies elements of general education, identifies various forms of general education, considers how these evolved historically, and points out how general education's aims are achieved in the current context. The text examines both historical context and current trends in order to consider multiple frames of reference and identify shared ideals and common practices for general education. Furthermore, the monograph considers the complex intersection between general education and current priorities and concerns for higher education. In doing so, it aims to provide valuable guidance to practitioners and researchers attending to advance renewal of general education within higher education's current context.

This monograph addresses timely questions. General education matters for how one frames and pursues the effective preparation of U.S. college and university graduates in the 21st century. General education matters for how one responds to questions of accountability, including the affordability and value of higher education. General education counts for how faculty members are rewarded for teaching within and beyond their disciplinary specializations. It matters for who actually teaches general education courses in today's new realities of contingent faculty (Selingo, 2013; Ginsberg, 2012; Umbach, 2007; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). It also matters as one considers the contribution of cocurricular educators and programs to the aims of general education.

The monograph also addresses timeless questions. The purpose and significance of general education is not a new question (Bell, 1966; Boning, 2007; Boyer, 1988; Boyer & Levine, 1981; Harvard University Committee, 1945; Miller, 1988; Stevens, 2001); yet this is a query that each social context must consider anew. General education renewal in the current context raises the "same questions that general education has always been asking: What is an individual's role in society? What is the good life? What are ethical decision-making criteria? What is the national and international context in which we

act?" (Kelly, 2006, p. 6). General education raises important queries of individual and social significance.

The following chapter surveys the history of general education, emphasizing the connections between general education and broader social and educational contexts. This historical backdrop is valuable context for educators who work with and around general education. By understanding the wide range of ideals espoused for general education and how they emerged over the past 300 years, educational leaders are better prepared to navigate the complexity of the present. The current context is a minefield of various assumptions around general education, and an informed comprehension of how multiple understandings of general education came to be is crucial for engaging the present.

We then turn to the contemporary conversation on general education. The third chapter begins by describing the conditions that influence general education, including various expected functions. This chapter also classifies and illustrates prominent models of general education as well as variations of the models and emerging trends.

The fourth chapter builds on the conceptual foundations previously described and turns to pragmatic questions that undergird effective general education in the current context. The chapter describes elements of effective general education in various institutional contexts, identifies and responds to concerns regarding general education and higher education policy (e.g., faculty reward structures, institutional costs), and describes the relationships between general education and other higher education priorities, including tenure and promotion, cocurricular programs, campus environments, and employer expectations. This chapter concludes by focusing on the close connections between general education and assessment.

The final chapter reflects on what it means to realize general education's purpose in the current context of U.S. higher education, and furnishes higher education researchers and administrators with ideas for shaping general education renewal.

History Matters: Tracing the Development of General Education

GENERAL EDUCATION AS a concept has unfolded over time and in tandem with pivotal reform movements in the academy and society. Historical turning points have entailed both new theoretical interpretations of general education as well as specific curricular innovations. General education's trajectory has necessarily shifted in response to evolving institutional and societal demands (Bastedo, 2011; Rudolph, 1977). General education, however, has also served as a generative "catalyst for innovation" as colleges and universities have responded to internal and external forces (Miller, 1988, p. 2).

How one views the genesis of general education in U.S. higher education, and even how one dates its inception, influences how one defines the concept and understands its significance. For example, a typical history of general education begins in 1636 with the colonial colleges, arguing that general education's aims were first embedded in the classical curriculum (Bastedo, 2002). From this perspective, general education is sometimes framed as interchangeable with classical and liberal education (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, 2014). This historical hermeneutic conflates general education's purpose with these two related but not synonymous terms. In actuality, the phrase *general education* dates back only to 1829, to a time when the ideals of a college education were in flux (Levine, 1978). A historical lens using this later interpretation tilts general education's meaning from the equivalent of a classical or liberal education and toward a curricular ideal that differs from practical study. While

these historical moments will be detailed later in this chapter, the point here is that history matters. How one thinks about the history of general education frames one's understanding of it and, in turn, what one believes to be its crucial elements.

Unfortunately, the higher education community hasn't always acknowledged the nebulous nature of any historical interpretation of general education. Attentiveness to this muddled history is crucial to considerations of what general education is and why it matters. Ultimately, any conversation about general education today evokes images of a long history of curricular change. It is critical to think clearly about what each of these turning points means for the present and future of general education. General education is a timely topic (Bok, 2013; Fong, 2013; Hanstedt, 2012; Menand, 2010). As Thelin (2011) reminds us, the discussion of timely higher education topics must begin with history. History matters because it shapes (and misshapes) one's views about general education's contribution to the purpose of higher education.

This chapter considers the history of general education as contextualized by shifting purposes of higher education in society and manifested in the emergence of new curricular ideals and models. In order to delineate these issues, higher education and its related versions of general education have been divided into five eras. In each period, I examine social context and institutional purpose, as well as curricular content and form.[4] Obvious and emerging tensions surrounding general education are identified within each period. The chapter concludes with summative analyses of pertinent queries for general education that cut across these historical eras.

Foundations (1636–1783)

The colonial college era predates the term *general education* by 200 years. However, this time period sets the stage for considering general education's ideals. One cannot understand general education or make sense of its roots or various reform movements without comprehending the educational vision of the colonial era in higher education.

The colonial college adhered to a fully prescribed, classical, and generalist course of study; in essence, a general education was the whole of a student's education rather than a part. In addition, a classical education precisely aligned with the aims of professional preparation for roles of public service and clergy (Boyer, 1977). There was no tension between intrinsic and extrinsic aims of education.

The colonial college era focused on imagining and founding a New World, one that carried a set of pervasive new ideals. The grand fervor to establish and ensure the long-term sustainability of a new society animated the founding of the colonial college (Rudolph, 1962/1990, 1977; Hofstadter & Smith, 1961). Protestant Christianity's influence was pervasive and interwoven with efforts to establish colleges that would sustain the new society (Bastedo, 2011; Rudolph, 1962/1990). The strong impulse to advance learning is apparent in the Harvard College 1643 fund-raising pamphlet *New England's First Fruits*:

> *After God had carried us safe to New England, and wee [sic] had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our lively-hood, rear'd convenient places for Gods worship, and setled the government: One of the next things we longed for, and looked after was to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity (Hofstadter & Smith, 1961, p. 6).*

A college education functioned as part of a grand social, political, and religious vision (Thelin, 2011, p. 23). The colonial colleges were designed to prepare young men from the upper classes for leadership in the church and civil service (Bastedo, 2011; Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Geiger, 2015; Rudolph, 1977; Thelin, 2011). The intent was "to qualify a governing elite" in order to carry forward the society they were founding (Rudolph, 1977, p. 28). Preparing clergy and civil servants was a central but not the sole purpose imagined for the colonial colleges. The charters of the colonial colleges also laid out a vision for educating men for professions beyond the "ministry" and as "public officials" (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997, p. 6). The pioneering ethos of a New World pervasively shaped the curriculum of the colonial college.

The colonial college both fulfilled and stretched existing notions of liberal education. The curriculum derived from the medieval university liberal arts ideal, specifically the *trivium* of logic, grammar, and rhetoric as well as the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (Roche, 2010). This tradition of the medieval university collided in the colonies with prevalent intellectual and social forces of the Renaissance and the Reformation. The resultant graft into this new context took the form of a "heightened respect for rhetoric and the addition of natural science, Greek, Hebrew, and ancient history to the traditional liberal arts" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 30). Rudolph (1977) argues that, in the transition from England to the colonies, the liberal arts were broadened by the burden of educating an elite. Cohen and Kiskar (2010) argue that this broadening of the liberal arts occurred in a different direction in that "liberal arts studies were adapted to religious purposes, modified to add various forms of philosophy and ethics, and prescribed for all who would count themselves among the learned" (p. 35). Regardless of which way one interprets the broadening, the liberal arts tradition was pivotal in the founding of the colonial colleges, and the manner in which they were adopted was unique to the New World context. The colonists, while inspired by their origins, created something new and innovative.

The curriculum of the early American college initially took the form of one uniform and fully prescribed the course of study required of all students (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Rudolph, 1977). The notion that collegiate preparation might look differently across occupations had yet to emerge. Moreover, a fixed, prescribed curriculum fit the prevailing purpose of higher learning, which was not for "advancing knowledge but for preserving what was already known" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 33). Change occurred within existing curricular frameworks even as there were efforts to change the frameworks themselves.

The notion of liberal education was further stretched and slowly expanded as the colonial era progressed. The theological purposes of the college curriculum decreased and the social purposes expanded (Rudolph, 1977). The founding of new colleges sometimes included the addition of subjects beyond initial conceptions of the traditional liberal arts. For example, "husbandry" (animal farming) and "commerce" were included in

the 1754 founding curriculum of King's College, now Columbia University (Rudolph, 1977, p. 28). The colonial colleges founded toward the end of this period modified the curricular focus on the classics and the Bible to include natural philosophy and more emphasis on mathematics (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010). Science in the curriculum was a bone of contention, championed by supporters but facing staunch resistance from those who held to the religious orientation of the college curriculum (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Rudolph, 1977). The classical education ideal gradually expanded with the curricular adoption of new subjects as well as through extracurricular lectures and literary societies (Bastedo, 2011).

A close look at the colonial era illuminates how many seemingly contemporary tensions surrounding general education have actually been germinating since the inception of U.S. higher education. The various ideals that are considered to constitute a general education find their roots as the notion of liberal education was transplanted to accommodate the soil of the new social context. The ideal of shared learning among "educated persons" was sown in the founding era. Still, despite a fully prescribed curriculum that fit the Puritan ethos, the question of "what courses of study should be required of all students" was a point of contention even in these early years (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010, p. 38). What constitutes liberal education and what the learned should hold in common are curricular debates whose roots are found in the colonial era; these curricular debates only gained momentum and grew in complexity as the curriculum morphed in the years that followed.

Additions and Tensions (1784–1869)

The years following the American Revolution were characterized by westward expansion and dramatic increases in both free and enslaved populations (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Geiger, 2015). New geographical settlements fueled the impulse to found colleges, as their presence boosted the credibility of new communities. The era was also marked by the growing realization that many groups were excluded from educational and occupational opportunity. The conditions of this period influenced both college founding and curricular innovation in existing colleges.

The founding of new institutions was fueled by a variety of factors. The expansion and splintering of church denominations led to the founding of colleges that advanced particular religious ideas (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Rudolph, 1962/1990). Because established colleges reflected the ethos of the time and did not admit women or ethnic, racial, and religious minorities, educational institutions were founded toward the end of this period to address these gaps (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Geiger, 2015). The first colleges to train teachers and the first municipal (local authority and tax base) colleges for nonresidential students were also established. The term "college" also referred to institutions that augmented apprentice programs. Since there was no official process to determine the meaning of the term, the more than 500 colleges founded during this period reflected a wide variety of intentions and missions (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Geiger, 2015; Thelin, 2011). Higher education institutions became as varied as the groups that founded them, the communities in which they were located, and the purposes for which they were established. Varied institutional purposes translated into a similarly expanding variety of curricular formations.

Curricula expanded and spread as the young country itself flexed its geographic muscle by spreading westward; colleges grafted new ideas onto the colonial ideal. The bachelor of arts curriculum that emphasized classical education and intended to form character was prototypical (Thelin, 2011). However, amid pressure for an education directed to the wider variety of people who would enter the professions of engineering, agriculture, mechanics, and manufacturing, elements of a varied and broadened curriculum beyond the classical began to emerge. Tension between advocates of classical studies and those who desired to introduce practical studies as well as new subjects increased as the era progressed (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Cohen & Kiskar, 2010). Higher education was in a state of conflict over the knowledge and skills requisite for the college curriculum (Bastedo, 2011; Rudolph, 1977; Thomas, 1962).

One outcome of the conflict was the Yale Report of 1828—an influential defense of the classical curriculum that famously defined "liberal education" as the "discipline and furniture of the mind" (Hofstadter & Smith, 1961, p. 278). The report argued that a variety of topics should be required

because each subject exercised a different facet of the mind, such as reason, judgment, memory, and taste (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Geiger, 2015; Hofstadter & Smith, 1961; Lucas, 2006). In a consequential shift of educational philosophy, the report highlighted liberal education, rather than religion, as the primary foundation of a college curriculum (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010). The Yale Report, and the assumptions that it both asserted and challenged, provided an influential rationale for the notion of a liberal education.

The shifting context inspired the earliest documented use of the phrase *general education* in reference to U.S. higher education (Levine, 1978). In 1829, A. S. Packard, a professor at Bowdoin College, lifted up the vision of "a general education" as central to the purpose of a college. In 1826, a group of professors at Amherst College had petitioned the board of trustees to establish a more "flexible curriculum" that led to a "parallel" course of study to the traditional classical curriculum (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997, p. 103). The Amherst curriculum included modern languages, English, history, political economy, and the natural sciences; it also included subjects such as architecture and teaching, as well as a course in "theoretical and practical mechanics to keep the college's plant in repair" (p. 103). *The Substance of Two Reports*, which Packard wrote on behalf of a Bowdoin College faculty committee, was a public, critical response to this curricular innovation at Amherst College.

The articulation of a vision for general education in *The Substance of Two Reports* proved a critical turning point. The term *general education* was birthed amid a period of strenuous curricular debate, particularly efforts to distinguish between and argue the importance of a broad liberal education and the more practical purposes of professional education (Levine, 1978; Thomas, 1962). Packard (1829) argued:

> *Our colleges are designed to give youth a general education, classical, literary, and scientific, as comprehensive as an education can well be, which is professedly preparatory alike for all the professions. They afford the means of instruction in all the branches, with which it is desirable for a youth to have a general acquaintance before directing his attention to a particular course of study, while professional studies are pursued at separate institutions, the law, divinity, and medical schools dispersed throughout the land (p. 300).*

Packard's definition of general education spanned classical, literary, and scientific ideals and also argued that a comprehensive education provided an essential foundation for professional study. The text as a whole reveals a variety of aspirations for a general education, including intellectual discipline, culture, differentiation from professional study, and classically based liberal education (Wells, 2013).

The mid-19th century continued a period of heavy debate regarding the purpose of a college education and related curricular ideals; these debates reveal shared commitment to but varied conceptions of general education. Debate over educational reforms among prominent college presidents largely centered on the place of classical versus practical study in the college curriculum (Bastedo, 2011; Thomas, 1962). Each voice argued that a liberal education was a crucial part of the work of the colleges that "must be preserved" but called for radically different proposals (Thomas, 1962, p. 21). Francis Wayland of Brown University proposed modest changes to the curriculum and emphasized that colleges be devoted to the service of the public, in the sense of functioning as the "centre of intelligence to all classes and conditions of men" (cited in Thomas, 1962, p. 22). Henry Tappan of the University of Michigan proposed a radical revision of the whole system, advocating that liberal education would "provide a broad culture for all" (cited in Thomas, 1962, p. 28) and cultivate all the "faculties of each individual" (cited in Thomas, 1962, p. 23).

Of presidential voices prominent in these debates, the ideas of Charles Eliot at Harvard College arguably hold the most complex influence on the unfolding conceptions and delivery models of general education. Eliot's well-known advocacy of the free-elective system was actually grounded in a vision of a general education (Thomas, 1962). Eliot (1909) argued in his inaugural address for the importance of a general education that provided a "general acquaintance with many branches of knowledge" in order to ensure an "intelligent public opinion" (p. 4). However, Eliot regarded "general education as a part of a liberal education, the whole of which each student would complete with those studies which he freely elected" (Thomas, 1962, p. 27).

Inserting a seemingly both/and voice into the largely polarized arguments over broad versus practical, Eliot (1909) argued that the choice was not between liberal and utilitarian studies but rather that all the studies open to the

student are "liberal and disciplinary, not narrow or special" (p. 13). In regard to the debate over which subjects should be included in the curriculum, Eliot (1909) argued that the "endless controversies whether language, philosophy, mathematics, or science supplies the best mental training, whether general education should be chiefly literary or chiefly scientific have no practical lesson for us today" (p. 1). Ultimately, he argued that the university should advance all the faculties of observation, expression, reason, and imagination but also recognize that developing any single one more fully doesn't "repress or dwarf the others" (p. 1). Toward this end, Eliot homed in on the purpose of a general education as advancing mental training, an ideal that could be realized without a prescribed, shared curriculum; this notion radically influenced unfolding educational philosophy.

Prominent influences for curricular change were not limited to college leaders, but extended to students themselves. Students requested usefulness and complained of "curricular dryness" (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010, p. 88). Students subsequently formed influential literary societies, building what was essentially their own curriculum; the formal curriculum was later modified to adopt many of the practices evident in the literary societies (Bastedo, 2011; Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Cohen & Kiskar, 2010). These reforms also shaped the unfolding ideals of a general education.

These patterns of curricular change are especially instructive as one discerns how this period shaped unfolding conceptions of general education. Innovation faced resistance in a dichotomous tension between allegiance to present or past, change or tradition. As a result, reforms were generally attempted not by replacing or modifying the classical curriculum but rather by creating various parallel courses of study, which enabled new courses to be introduced without compromising the status quo. In essence, curricular innovations were instituted alongside rather than in lieu of the prominent colonial curriculum. These parallel courses were lightning rods for controversy over what constituted a legitimate baccalaureate degree. For example, the Amherst course of study that initially sparked A. S. Packard's critique was so controversial that it was abandoned after 2 years.

In addition, perspectives on what constituted a general education shifted amid transition in the ideals of a liberal education. The classical curriculum

was decentered as the standard of a liberal education (Thomas, 1962). At the same time, a liberal education ideal replaced religion as central to a baccalaureate degree (Yale Report, 1961). The ideals by which a general education was judged slowly morphed over the period amid curricular additions that expanded perspectives on a general education and offered multiple pathways toward the completion of a college education.

A variety of seeds that influence general education today were either planted or fertilized in this era. The perennial seed that a general education was part and parcel of the college experience was disseminated in the colonial era, but its fertilization and budding emergence took place in this period. The perceived dichotomy between liberal and professional education reared its head and, for some, general education was suggested as an antidote to the tension. The seeds for tension between utilitarian and intrinsic values of a college education were also scattered. The explicit emphasis that general education was a means to "intellectual discipline" was a critical new development. General education as a means to shared culture and societal well-being was a seed clearly planted in the colonial period but fertilized in this one. Amid the heavy debates and tensions of the period, conceptions of general education propagated.

Industrialization and Mediation (1870–1939)

Higher education experienced monumental change during this period. In the years following the Civil War, the country had massive population growth that fueled college enrollment (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Geiger, 2015; Lucas, 2006). Industrialization dominated the ethos, as new machinery enhanced agricultural productivity, railroad building, and oil and metal discovery. Toward the end of the era, the United States emerged from World War I as a powerful global player but found itself in the Great Depression. The general education curriculum shifted in concert with these societal episodes.

Federal legislation buttressed an expanding institutional purpose in support of industrialization. The Morrill Act of 1862 gave states property with the intent that the funds derived from selling the land be directed to broadening

the curriculum "to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts … in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in several pursuits and professions of life" (Hofstadter & Smith, 1961, p. 568). The trajectory toward industrialization and expanded institutional purpose influenced curricular change.

The curriculum broadened in several directions, with the most prominent trend being the trajectory toward professionalism and variety. Professors, increasingly educated in specialized graduate programs, influenced the organization of academic departments, and influenced the shift toward narrower curricular channels (Geiger, 2015; Lucas, 2006). Trends toward variety and specialization prompted criticism from those who were concerned that common knowledge and shared values were being displaced by specialized research and career preparation (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010).

Tense curricular debate throughout the late 19th century and early 20th century took place between those arguing that a college education must be prescribed and those preferring choice (Bastedo, 2011). The elective system had provided sufficient variety so that students could pursue courses that fit their interests and aspirations. Critics of the elective system argued that the bachelor's degree then referred to no common learning experience and that prescribed content was necessary if higher education were to serve its rightful place in society (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Geiger, 2015). In an effort to mediate these tensions, Lawrence Lowell as president of Harvard instituted a set of distribution requirements that forced students to select courses from particular categories to ensure that all students received a liberal education (Bastedo, 2011; Geiger, 2015). While this model meant that students were exposed to areas of knowledge, critics raised concern that the distribution model lacked a common, prescribed, and unified curriculum.

Reaction against the fractured curriculum coalesced in the general education movement of the 1920s and 1930s (Miller, 1988). General education adherents sought to sustain a set of common values, to establish a foundational basis of knowledge, and to unify knowledge (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Geiger, 2015). Meiklejohn (1922) prominently argued that the "opinion that knowledge has no unity" has brought college teaching into "incoherence and confusion" (p. 2).

The relaxation of prescribed curricula and the rise of occupational emphasis in the curriculum were met with well-documented initiatives to reinstate classical education that influenced the direction of general education. Robert Maynard Hutchins's book *The Higher Learning in America* (1936) "derided the vocationalism and intellectual content of higher education and prescribed a new course centered on the classics" (p. 422). Hutchins advocated a fully prescribed program of general education, one that centered on grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, and the classics of Western civilization. Inspired by the work of John Erskine, whose General Honors course at Columbia required students to read 52 classics—from Homer to William James—in a single year, Hutchins developed a Great Books course at the University of Chicago, limited to 20 students by invitation. In the late 1930s, St. John's College as a whole was revamped around the Great Books notion. The movement to have a college curriculum centered on the Great Books left a lasting imprint on the debate surrounding general education, although the curriculum was implemented in only scattered places across the overall landscape (Bastedo, 2011; Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Geiger, 2015). Despite the bounded nature of this movement, the call for a classical education fueled an influential narrative that evoked images of the colonial curriculum and the Yale Report of 1828 in aligning general education with classic texts in the minds of many.

Across this period, general education remained a fervent ideal that was addressed with a variety of curricular models. As the socioeducational context fueled focus on occupational utility and specialized research, the seeds of general education continued to germinate and spread. Efforts to mitigate the elective system and specialization led to general education models that facilitated integration and unity of knowledge. General education also was posited as a means to mitigate overemphasis on occupational training by creating space for a return to the classics. On the whole, efforts to maintain a general education as higher education shifted toward specialization created the space for a very active period of general education reform.

A number of perennial lessons of general education are evident in this period. Many innovations took place as changes within institutions, most being experimental programs that fostered change without disturbing the larger institutional setting. Unlike the previous era, many of these changes were

successfully implemented and sustained. At the same time, experimentation fostered an environment in which multiple curricular models took form. The professional emphasis in the college curriculum did not replace the liberal arts, but rather bloomed alongside it. The imagination for general education continued to be stretched, and considerations of what constituted a general education grew more and more varied.

Rapid Growth and New Expectations (1940–1976)

Higher education's compact with society was a generative force as higher education emerged following World War II and navigated the Cold War, Sputnik, and various social movements. Between the postwar population surge and the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, which provided financial aid for veterans, this era was the golden age in terms of the growth of higher education (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Geiger, 2015; Thelin, 2011). One aspect of this development was the enrollment of new populations of students, many differently prepared than previous generations. The nation's desire was that higher education would serve as an engine of global competition. Alongside this rapid growth, higher education faced seismic shifts in social expectations.

The social context placed many forces on the curriculum. Differing levels of preparation prompted colleges to offer remedial studies. Stronger alignment between curricular innovation and employer expectations further expanded occupational studies. Academic subspecialties grew amid clamor for scientific and technical progress. Student activism prompted curricular additions that reflected the new demographics, notably women's and ethnic studies curricula. Higher education radically widened its purposes to include applied research, high school remediation, and job-entry skills (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Geiger, 2015). Taken together, these developments led to increases in curricular variety and new questions regarding the place and purpose of general education.

The aims and methods of a general education were points of debate from the beginning to the end of the era. In its report, the Harvard University Committee on the Objectives of a General Education in a Free Society (1945)

presented a clarification of general education as part of its comprehensive recommendations for changing the Harvard curriculum. The committee emphasized what general education was *not*, arguing that general education did not mean some lofty education, nor was it without form, nor was it whatever was left over after specialization, nor was it conceived in terms of a specific set of texts or courses. The purview of general education was argued to prepare individuals for the "common sphere" that is the element of a "student's whole education which looks first of all to his life as a responsible human being and citizen" (Harvard University Committee, 1945, p. 51). The committee advanced a new emphasis on general education as crucial for social relations and national unity in a democratic society and achieved by exposure to major areas of knowledge.

The Harvard report advocated a balance between general and specialized education by requiring students to take one or more courses in the natural sciences, humanities, and social studies either prior to or alongside specialized learning. The curricular design recommendations included a combination of survey courses and distribution requirements (Lucas, 1996). The Harvard report was instrumental in shaping conceptions and practices of general education; the committee's argument that general education serves the needs of democracy was a dominant theme (Geiger, 2015). The social ideal of general education was echoed by *Higher Education for American Democracy: A Report* by the President's Commission on Higher Education (1947). Similar to the Harvard University Committee, the Truman Commission emphasized the social function expected of higher education and underscored general education's contribution to that end (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997).

In the mid-1960s, efforts to reform general education at Columbia College emphasized a different outcome as central to general education's aims. Specifically, ways of thinking were advanced as the primary purpose of general education. In *The Reforming of General Education: The Columbia College Experience in Its National Setting*, Daniel Bell (1966) attempted to redefine general education as part of his argument that the "distinctive function of the college must be to teach modes of conceptualization, explanation, and verification of knowledge" as opposed to specific content (p. 8). Toward this end, he argued that general education meant a "common, if not always uniform,

intellectual experience for all students for at least a portion of their undergraduate years" (Bell, 1966, p. x). Bell argued that conceptual analysis and critical thinking were outcomes best attained in undergraduate education, given its being situated between the focus on facts in secondary education and the specialization emphasis of graduate school. Bell's argument stood in stark contrast to those who believed that the classics were worthwhile in and of themselves rather than as a means to intellectual skill development.

Despite these well-documented and widely publicized proposals, the most prominent redefinition of general education by the end of this era was a particular system of delivery, specifically a set of distribution requirements. A typical but not exclusive pattern had developed across institutional type in which students were dividing their time almost equally among their major fields, electives, and distribution requirements (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010). The distribution model that vowed a "breadth of knowledge" appeased the specialization culture in that academic departments "could list several specialized classes and allow students to choose" (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010, p. 155). In addition, broad survey courses, such as those that covered Western history from ancient Greece to the present, grew prominent.

While distribution requirements and survey courses were advanced, some prioritized the notion of general education and its role in achieving an integrated educational experience (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Geiger, 2015). These proponents argued for an "integrated curriculum" that would enable students to develop a "framework on which to place knowledge stemming from various sources and teach them to think critically, develop values, understand traditions, respect diverse opinions. The term *general education* . . . was continually brought forward as the descriptor for this type of holistic education" (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010, p. 242; italics in original).

In the end, this era boasted rich but competing conceptions of general education. From one vantage point, general education was considered to be the space tasked with shaping a shared commitment and responsibility to society as embodied by the Harvard University Committee and the Truman Commission. From another, general education was charged with advancing individual intellectual abilities and serving as a bridge between factual knowledge and specialized education, as evidenced by Bell's perspective. General

education became prominently equated with breadth of knowledge, and perhaps more consequentially with the distribution curricular design in which students choose across knowledge categories. Nonetheless, the call for general education as a space for integrated and holistic education maintained a place at the table. This era of rapid growth and new expectations cemented a curricular paradox that general education should fulfill multiple and sometimes competing visions.

Overgrowth and Struggle (1977–2005[5])

Societal changes during this period included an aging population, more women in the workforce, and the end of the Cold War. The end of the period was marked by the Al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center and subsequent tensions with the Middle East. Some trends from previous eras shifted: part-time rather than full-time jobs increased, civic participation decreased, and immigration to the United States accelerated from Central America, South America, and Eastern Asia. Higher education negotiated these political and social developments with new enrollment growth patterns, such as enlarging capacity at existing institutions, building branch campuses, and increasing percentages of part-time students.

The curriculum continued changing by accretion. Colleges typically added more programs and courses than they dropped so that "[v]estiges of every prior curriculum were present everywhere" (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010, pp. 366–367). The power struggle continued between proponents of curricular choice and those arguing for a common core. In the end, the content of a bachelor's degree grew to encompass a greater variety of forms. This context created the conditions for a new wave of arguments for general education, notably emphasizing its role in achieving shared outcomes of a college education.

The era opened with a loud cry to attend to general education. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's (1977) report, *Missions of the College Curriculum*, deplored fragmentation and overspecialization. Ernest L. Boyer, the foundation's president, broadly championed coherence and integration in undergraduate education (Boyer & Kaplan, 1977;

Boyer & Levine, 1981). In *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, Boyer (1987) outlined the notion of the integrated core as an adaptable framework for general education to "introduce students not only to essential knowledge,[6] but also to connections across the disciplines, and in the end, to the application of knowledge to life beyond the campus," concerning itself with the "experiences that are common to all people" (p. 15). In essence, the Carnegie Foundation's efforts to renew general education emphasized an interconnected set of aims: specifically, essential knowledge, integration of knowledge, shared experience, and application. The Carnegie Foundation and its president were not uncontested voices clamoring for attention to general education.

A variety of voices raised concern about academic effectiveness and lack of coherence, and named general education as a remedy (Geiger, 2015). General education was the prevailing theme of higher education reform (Gaff, 1988). *Involvement in Learning* (National Institute on Education, 1984), published by a study group convened by the U.S. Department of Education, identified and described student involvement, high expectations, and assessment as "conditions of excellence in higher education" (pp. 56–57). *Involvement in Learning* set in motion a renewed focus on institutional effectiveness, including the argument that colleges and universities urge society toward a "generally educated and actively engaged" population (Eaton, 1991, p. 57). *Involvement in Learning* laid the groundwork for renewed focus on educational effectiveness and essential outcomes of an undergraduate education as new directions for general education.

Another widely influential report, *Integrity in the College Curriculum*, attacked the consumer philosophy of the curriculum and outlined recommendations for required curriculum in undergraduate education.[7] The report raised the perennial question: "Is the curriculum an invitation to philosophic and intellectual growth or a quick exposure to the skills of a particular vocation? Or is it both?" (Association of American Colleges, 1985, p. 2). These broad calls to improve the overall quality of higher education, each reemphasizing particular aims of a general education, were voiced alongside others recommending specific proposals for general education.

A new round of voices deploring the turn away from the classics fueled lively curricular debate (Bastedo, 2011; Eaton, 1991; Geiger, 2015). *To Reclaim a Legacy* (Bennett, 1984), published by the National Endowment for the Humanities, critiqued what it considered a declining emphasis on the humanities and overemphasis on student choice in the curriculum, and advocated a return to the Great Books. Five years later, the National Endowment for the Humanities published its report *50 Hours* (Cheney, 1989), which put forth a model consisting of 50 required semester hours that encouraged "substantive learning in essential areas of knowledge" (p. 8) and emphasized "classic works and significant ideas" (p. 59).[8] Moreover, *50 Hours* prescribed that these areas of knowledge be delivered across the first, second, and third year of an undergraduate education, leaving the senior year to be devoted to the major and electives.

Similar arguments calling for a Western humanities curriculum were made in more broadly read publications. Allan Bloom's (1987) *The Closing of the American Mind* derided efforts to expand the curriculum beyond Western texts, arguing that it "encouraged an unhealthy cultural pluralism" (p. 415). Dinesh D'Souza's (1991) *Illiberal Education* supported the National Endowment's *50 Hours* curriculum and raised concerns similar to Bloom's regarding cultural pluralism (Bastedo, 2011).

The insistence on a Western humanities curriculum embedded across these reports engendered much pushback (Carnochan, 1993; Eaton, 1991; Geiger, 2015; Levine, 1996). Some argued that the "new demographics of higher education demanded the inclusion of new authors in general education programs that reflected an increasing multicultural society" (Bastedo, 2011, p. 415). More attention to diversity in general education was urged (Humphreys, 1997; Musil, 1996). Despite high-profile debate over expanding the curriculum to include non-Western cultures, there was only modest impact (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010). The widespread controversy over the required curriculum and multiculturalism got more press than imprint.

The debate over curricular inclusion of non-Western texts was not alone as an arena of heated debate during this era. A growing chorus called for a more coherent structure in general education (Association of American

Colleges, 1985; Boyer, 1987; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1977; Cheney, 1989; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Furthermore, a variety of curricular strategies were prescribed as antidotes to the lack of structure and coherence, including "integrated core" (Boyer, 1987), a required 50-hour curriculum (Cheney, 1989), and classic texts (Bloom, 1987; D'Souza, 1991). Nonetheless, the flurry of reports gained more public attention than curricular traction (Eaton, 1991; Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, & Gaff, 2001). Gaff (1989) called for broadening the general education reforms and confronting the barriers to developing and implementing reforms.

By the end of the era, Adelman (2004) established that despite high-profile debate in multiple directions, an "empirical core curriculum" composed of 30 courses, representing roughly one third of all credits earned, had been "reasonably consistent over the years" and most often completed by bachelor's degree recipients (p. 498). Amid the variety of debates about general education and how to achieve it, a relatively consistent body of subjects came to be shared by undergraduates.

One lesson of the era is that no single, shared set of assumptions underlies general education. This sheds light on why the recurrent call to renew general education as a means to address broader concerns for higher education so rarely gains traction. A related lesson of the era, clarified by the distance of history, is that a growing and loud chorus of critical voices does not necessarily parallel actual changes in the curriculum. The debates regarding general education may grab the headlines, but curriculum changes do not necessarily follow suit.

Historical Reflections and Insights

Reflecting on the history of general education as a whole leads to some crucial insights. First and foremost, the tensions that surround general education, including its authenticity and preferred delivery models, are nothing new. General education as a term was birthed in the midst of broader tension over the place of liberal and practical study in higher education. From its

inception, general education has been conceptualized within broader tensions of the academy. As history unfolded, general education came to reflect many tensions: "between what to teach and how to teach it, between the great classics of the past and contemporary works, between the classroom and students' out-of-class life, between students' individual objectives and the needs of the community, between what students want and what their institutions think they need" (Association of American Colleges, 1988, p. 5). A close look also reveals that these tensions galvanized efforts toward curricular reform, and in their midst new conceptions of general education were advanced.

General education served as a space of innovation as colleges and universities negotiated the dynamics of social and educational change (Miller, 1988). In the beginning, colleges typically offered a shared, prescribed curriculum for all students. Elective models were put forth in the late 19th century and early 20th century that expanded perspectives of a general education (Eliot, 1909). Distribution requirements were created in the early 20th century as a "remedy" for ill consequences of the elective system and the trajectory toward specialization. As Levine (2006) astutely points out, the "revolutionizing processes of modernity demanded a number of novel educational adaptations" that affected the unfolding of general education (p. 33). A number of general education reforms were motivated by a desire to overcome the perceived discontent associated with educational change. The dynamics of tension and change underlie ongoing modification in the definitions, methods, and models that constitute general education.

There are remarkable parallels across the historical record reflecting the influence of general education ideals on broader higher education reform. The prominent curriculum controversy initially evoked in the early 19th century between practical and liberal education (Packard, 1829; Yale Report, 1961) morphed in the mid-20th century into a struggle between those who privileged the educational ideals of reflection and self-knowledge and those who considered the primary purpose of education to be preparing people for profitable work (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010). The rapid increases in specialized knowledge necessary to fulfill expanding arenas of professional expertise led to calls for integration and coherence in undergraduate education. The debates over general education since the 1980s continue to reflect this dynamic of

tension over intrinsic and practical aims of education. Emerging knowledge, expanding student demographics, changing social and political realities have repeatedly given new life to these basic philosophical arguments. The dialectic between polarities has proven to be fertile ground for cultivating conceptions of general education.

General education has inherited a peculiar dynamic in that it is expected to fulfill multiple and sometimes competing visions. Additive patterns of innovation and expanding aims of higher education have led to an ever-wider range of ideals as to what constitutes a general education and what curricular designs best serve to achieve it. The next chapter examines how these historical developments influence expectations for general education in the current context.

Contemporary Perspectives and Models

THE EXAMINATION OF curricular developments in historical context in the preceding chapter illuminates the various and often competing priorities evident for general education. This chapter turns to the current context to point out how various inherited expectations for general education come to fruition in the present. It classifies and illustrates prominent models of general education, depicts variations of the models, and identifies emerging trends.

Inherited Functions

History has conferred a wide variety of functions to general education. These functions can be categorized broadly as expectations for student learning, societal well-being, and institutional mission.

Student Learning

In the contemporary context, general education is expected to advance a wide variety of student learning outcomes (Banta, 2007; Bresciani, 2007; Wehlburg, 2010). General education outcomes include intellectual proficiencies, ethics and meaning, and holistic education. Moreover, these skills align solidly with preparation for employment in today's context.

Intellectual Proficiencies. General education is identified as a central space for the advancement of a wide range of intellectual capacities. Students

are expected to learn key concepts and methodologies (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015). General education is also saddled with the expectation for specific knowledge, including texts and ideas. Beyond knowledge itself, general education is expected to advance intellectual skills.

General education is charged with advancing written and oral communication skills (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007). Critical thinking and problem solving are outcomes expected for general education (Banta, 2007; Fliegel & Holland, 2013; National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007). Furthermore, quantitative capacities are identified as a domain of general education, including scientific reasoning (Waldo, 2014) and mathematical capacities (Agustin, Agustin, Brunkow, & Thomas, 2012; Wismath & Mackay, 2012).

General education is also expected to advance information literacy, including researching information contexts, evaluating data, and synthesizing disparate ideas (Banta, 2007; Banta & Mzumara, 2007; National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007). Finally, creative thinking and innovation are outcomes identified for general education (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007). General education is identified not only as a central source for advancing learning but also as a place to help students evaluate the quality of their own learning (Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009). The intellectual capacities identified as expectations for general education alone are overwhelming; nonetheless, general education is charged with helping students to decipher the ethical dimensions of knowledge and to use their intellectual capacities to virtuous ends.

Ethics and Meaning. General education is associated with students making sense of information and adopting its use for ethical aims. General education is also depended upon to advance ethical reasoning (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007). Moral awareness is a purported outcome of general education (Forest & Keith, 2007). Alongside ethical sensibilities, general education is expected to advance meaning.

General education is associated with students making meaning of their own lives (Clydesdale, 2015; Kronman, 2007). Moreover, a general education is attributed with cultivating a sense of values and clarifying beliefs (Astin, 2004). Beyond intellectual skills and ethical formation, general education is identified as a source of well-rounded personal development.

Holistic Education. General education is touted as advancing well-rounded human beings (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; Gaston, 2015; Lamy & Fleigel, 2013). Being able to work as a member of a team is noted as an outcome of general education (Hughes & Jones, 2011; National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007).

Intellectual capacities, ethical sensibilities, and holistic abilities are identified as important aspects of a general education but also as aspects of employability.

Employment Preparation. The expectations traditionally associated with a general education are being aligned with employer expectations for college graduates (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009; Gaston, 2015; Hart Associates, 2013; National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007). Such a shift is argued as a necessary adaptation for general education in the current social context. Employees are being asked to demonstrate a broader skill set and address more complex challenges than was required in the past (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009). The bifurcation of the major as narrow preparation for employment and general education as breadth is no longer valid or generative (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007; Roche, 2010; Schneider & Shoenberg, 1998). Students need more than technical expertise; they also require analytical reasoning skills, strong interpersonal abilities, effective communication skills, and ethical sensibilities (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009). Moreover, college graduates can expect to change jobs or even careers multiple times, requiring them to be able to learn and adapt in order to both secure employment as well as remain employable (Gaston, 2015).

In sum, effective general education is saddled with multifaceted expectations for student learning. General education develops both intellectual

proficiencies and personal abilities. It requires not simply exposing undergraduates to information but rather preparing students to synthesize, deliberate, and apply information. Moreover, unlike previous eras when general education expectations were largely distinct from specific preparation for employment, recent arguments for student learning outcomes in general education are targeted to employer expectations. Beyond expectations of individual student learning, general education is expected to fulfill societal aims.

Communal Well-Being

General Education in a Free Society (Harvard University Committee, 1945) was a rallying cry to attend to the democratic purposes of higher education that outlined recommendations for a general education program in light of societal aims. Critiques that higher education has neglected its commitment to communal well-being persist and are accompanied by new sets of recommendations for general education (Cantor & Englot, 2013; Hovland, 2006; Pollack, 2013). General education's role in shaping an educated citizenry and commitments to public responsibility is broadly proclaimed (Bok, 2005, 2013; Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhart, 2005; Lewis, 2006; Pasque, 2010). General education has been highlighted as necessary for preparing students who will contribute to building a more equitable society and a more global commons (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). Some outcomes associated with general education that purport to maintain communal well-being include democratic outcomes and global learning.

Democratic Outcomes. General education is a means to democratic outcomes (Gaston, 2015; Kezar et al., 2005). Melville, Dedrick, and Gish (2013) point out that the importance of democratic outcomes is a long-standing commitment, documenting the role of preparing citizens in Harvard's founding. At the same time, Flanagan, Faust, and Pykett (2013) evoke the land-grant legacy in arguing that advancing "democratic dispositions and skills" is paramount (p. 247). Democratic dispositions mean the "inclination to work with others different from oneself toward shared ends" and these authors suggest that such dispositions are embodied in "people with strong convictions but with a commitment to civic goods" (p. 251). As society has grown more global, civic learning has also expanded its contexts.

Global Learning. General education's expectations encompass preparation not only for local and national contexts, but also for global ones (Hanstedt, 2012; National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007). Colleges and universities have been called upon to develop comprehensive and integrated approaches to global learning within the general education program (Hovland, 2006). Civic education has been proposed as a "non-negotiable, sought-after outcome for every student" (Musil, 2015, p. 5). Such a broad call layers yet new expectations upon general education's already full plate.

Civic dispositions in national, global, as well as local contexts frame a wide variety of specific skills and abilities. Such capacities include encounters with difference and humility (Flanagan et al., 2013), equity-mindedness (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; Witham, Lindsey, Malcom-Piqueux, Dowd, & Bensimon, 2014), awareness of privilege and injustice (Flanagan et al., 2013; Hovland, 2006), and critical civic literacy (Pollack, 2013). Melville, Dedrick, and Gish (2013) argue that educating for citizenship demands knowledge of public life, caring and commitment to "collective well-being," choosing courses of action based on the process of "public deliberation," and finally engaging and doing the work of democracy (p. 261). Recent leaders have posited that civic responsibility be considered integral to employment preparation (Minnich, 2015; Musil, 2015; Ronan & Barker, 2015).

The expectation to advance communal outcomes represents the overarching idea that general education prepares students to "continue the work of building an ever-more inclusive and just society and global community" (Pollack, 2013, p. 223). As such, general education is expected not only to advance knowledge and awareness but also to raise an actionable consciousness. Even beyond advancing individual learning and ensuring the well-being of American democracy and global community, general education advances outcomes in and for its institutional context.

Institutional Purposes for General Education

General education not only functions as an important educational element for the individual student and for society, but also serves key functions for

the institution. General education provides a means of integration as well as imprinting mission and identity on the educational program.

Integration. A crucial contribution of general education is integration (Czechowski, 2003; Wehlburg, 2010). Navigating the academic context is complex; students complete their major or majors, their minor or minors, and perhaps a concentration or concentrations. They also complete general education requirements that have varying degrees of overlap with their area or areas of specialization. Beyond coursework, students navigate a wide variety of curricular experiences, such as internships, study abroad, labs, research, and field experiences.

Students also navigate various out-of-class experiences, including employment on or off campus, residence hall experiences, as well as clubs and organizations. Students wrestle with friendships and intimate relationships during the college years. And finally, students navigate family dynamics and the impact of college on those dynamics whether or not the student leaves home. The social and relational context of college students' lives lends itself to complex demands for attention. Making sense of the varied and fragmented experiences associated with a college education demands an intentional context for integrative learning that general education uniquely provides (Wehlburg, 2010).

Mission and Identity. Another contribution of a general education program is its imprint on the educational program of a particular college or university. General education influences an institution's ability to both frame and fulfill its mission. Specifically, general education makes a unique contribution to the manner in which the educational program reflects an institution's mission and identity (Lewis, 2006; Rhodes, 2010a; Riordan & Sharkey, 2010). Menand (2010) notes that a "college's general education curriculum, what the faculty chooses to require of everyone, is a reflection of its overall educational philosophy" (p. 23). General education is a profoundly complex task but a consequential one in framing and fulfilling the mission and identity of colleges and universities.

Embodying institutional mission is also evident in the expectations for general education outlined by regional accrediting bodies. The Higher Learning Association (2015), for example, reviews whether the "general education

program is appropriate to the mission, educational offerings, and degree levels of the institution" (Criterion 3, subpoint B.1). Similarly, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2006) requires institutions to "identify and provide a core of general education that expresses the educational philosophy of the institution" (p. 47). General education reflects a commitment to "shared learning that is distinctive" to the particular college or university (Bowen, 2004, p. 31). General education is expected to be institutionally unique.

Some institutions have made the general education program a "signature element of institutional identity" (Bowen, 2004, p. 31). For example, at George Mason University, students complete a number of general education requirements entitled the "Mason Core." Institutional documents note that the Mason University graduate should be "an engaged citizen, a well-rounded scholar, and someone who is prepared to act for the world" (George Mason University, n.d.). In 2014, the university reframed its general education program in order to "better illuminate the full range of coursework that prepares students for work in their major and to align with the Mason Graduate goals" (George Mason University, n.d.). General education, then, serves as a means of communicating the institution's mission-based educational philosophy.

Now that the multifaceted functions of general education have been broadly articulated, I turn next to the various models of general education

Models of General Education

The curricular history in U.S. higher education, as narrated in the preceding chapter, delineates various means of delivering a general education curriculum. It is this history, and its intermittent curricular reform moments, that leave higher education with a few primary models of general education and an infinite variety of variations of these models.

Prominent Theoretical Models

Three primary models of delivering general education are core, distribution, and competency development.[9] It is important to be clear at the outset that it is the rare college or university that uses any one model of general education

in its purest iteration. Most colleges have a mix of models that reflect not only curricular history in U.S. higher education but also specific institutional history. Nonetheless, having a clear picture of the models themselves is helpful in discerning the building blocks of any general education design.

Core. The core model of general education presumes that there is a discrete body of knowledge that every educated person ought to know (Allen, 2006; Bennett, 1984; Hanstedt, 2012; Menand, 2010; Nelson & Associates, 2000; Nussbaum, 1997). The core model requires that all students at an institution complete a series of prescribed courses. These are interdisciplinary courses taught by faculty drawn from a variety of fields. By design, all or most general education courses in a core model are outside the academic department and stand in a separate place in the course catalog (Hanstedt, 2012). Furthermore, these courses are intended specifically for nonspecialists.

Columbia University famously instituted the core model and remains a prominent illustration of its adoption (Katz, 2005). Columbia University's core curriculum is a "set of common courses required of all undergraduates and considered the necessary general education for students" (Columbia University, n.d.). The program comprises a series of small, discussion-based seminars exploring foundational texts, enduring documents, and exemplary experiments in literature, philosophy, history, music, art, writing, and science. The core "creates a community of shared inquiry that ranges across intellectual disciplines, historical eras, cultural contexts and contemporary concerns" and "connects generations of Columbia students with each other." The "communal learning—with all students encountering the same texts and issues at the same time—and the critical dialogue experienced in small seminars are the distinctive features of the Core" (Columbia University, n.d.).

Columbia University students take six courses as part of the core curriculum: Contemporary Civilization, Literature Humanities, University Writing, Art Humanities, Music Humanities, and Frontiers of Science. Literature Humanities, required of all first-year students, surveys influential works of Western literature over two semesters. Contemporary Civilization, a two-semester requirement for sophomores, surveys the history of moral and political thought. Frontiers of Science is a one-semester course that engages questions of science and their implications. Art Humanities is a one-semester

course that focuses on the formal structure and historical context of works of architecture and art. Music Humanities covers music in the Western world and wrestles with the character and purposes of music. Finally, students take University Writing, which attends to the practices of critical reading, rhetorical analysis, research, and revision. The writing course is offered in a general University Writing course or theme-specific sections, such as Readings in American Studies, Readings in Sustainable Development, or Readings in Human Rights.

The core model offers several benefits. The term "core" implies the "centrality of this part of the undergraduate experience in terms of structure, function, and goals" (Bowen, 2004, p. 31). Consistent with this idea, the curricular structure privileges interconnections across different fields, various methodologies, and diverse ways of viewing the world. Another benefit is that core courses are designed for a single purpose, the interdisciplinary content and methodological aims of the course, rather than having to meet the needs of multiple audiences. Because the core necessarily draws faculty across departments into shared discussion, the model potentiates a community of shared values and educational practices (Hanstedt, 2012). These benefits, however, mirror the challenges in implementing and sustaining the core model.

The core model runs counter to specialized culture. Course design by the faculty member working outside his or her discipline for the nonspecialist audience is challenging. Faculty who are experts in a discipline may find it disheartening to teach general content (Allen, 2006). Students also have difficulty seeing the benefits of these courses, given their desire to focus on their majors. These courses can also be expensive to design and sustain, as they often draw upon interdisciplinary teaching models and always require ongoing faculty development (Hanstedt, 2012). Another challenge to the core model is that it presumes that students attend one institution throughout the course of their undergraduate program when, in fact, a significant number of students enroll in multiple institutions en route to the baccalaureate degree (Allen, 2006; National Student Clearinghouse, 2014; Selingo, 2013). Issues associated with transfer students pose a challenge to institutions in determining at what curricular point to offer and require core courses, and in which cases, if any, to allow transfer credits to meet core requirements.

In contrast to the core model with its focus on a specific subset of interdisciplinary courses, the distribution model advances the aims of general education through a wide range of courses across disciplines.

Distribution. The basis of the distribution model is to provide "breadth" to complement the "in-depth" study of the major (Allen, 2006; Menand, 2010). The distribution model introduces students to a variety of disciplines and their various bodies of knowledge and methodologies. Distribution models typically require students to take a variety of courses across the disciplines, although the way disciplines are reflected in the requirements varies (Allen, 2006).

Yale University illustrates the distribution model in current practice. The principle of the distribution model as articulated at Yale is to "ensure that study is neither too narrowly focused nor too diffuse" (Yale University, n.d.). Distribution requirements are intended to make sure that all students have "an acquaintance with a broad variety of fields of inquiry and approaches to knowledge" (Yale University, n.d.).

Yale's distribution requirements are set up across disciplinary content. Students must take two courses in the humanities and arts, two in the sciences, and two in the social sciences as part of their baccalaureate degree requirements. Although some courses carry more than one distributional designation, students may apply a single course to only one of those distributional requirements. For example, if a course is designated to meet both humanities and social sciences requirements, it may be applied by the individual student toward either the humanities and arts requirement or the social sciences requirement but not toward both.

The animating purpose of the distribution model is for the student to acquire a way of thinking and a set of skills and attitudes (Allen, 2006; Katz, 2005; Menand, 2010). The distribution system rests on the premise that what it means to be generally educated is not limited to a specific body of knowledge. Rather, general education is equated with a background mentality or what Menand (2010) refers to as a "kind of intellectual DNA that informs work in every specialized area of inquiry" (p. 28). The rationale of the distribution model is that the DNA is what a college tries to transmit. The main

challenge of the distribution model, like DNA itself, is that what is actually transmitted to the student varies.

Fulfilling distribution requirements does not ensure breadth despite rhetoric to the contrary. One problem with this model is that students pick and choose their courses based on their own objectives, often placing ease or schedule convenience above learning (Ewell, 2004; Hanstedt, 2012). Students even perceive these requirements as a "bunch of heterogeneous hoops" to jump through with no particular value (Bauerlein, 2009, para. 5). Another problem is that, on its own and in isolation, merely exposing students to information outside one's field with no obvious connection to personal or professional goals is ineffective (Hanstedt, 2012). Moreoever, distribution requirements do not automatically engage students in broad learning. As the Yale literature itself articulates, distribution requirements serve as an educational baseline: "By themselves, the distributional requirements constitute a minimal education, not a complete one, and represent the least that an educated person should seek to know. They are to be embraced as starting points, not goals" (Yale University, n.d.).

Furthermore, courses within a distribution model pose design challenges given the need to attend to both the major and nonmajor audience. The same courses designed to educate the specialist in his or her curricular requirements are those utilized to fulfill the breadth of subject matter for students outside the major. Thus, students in each class reflect two audiences with two distinct and potentially conflicting aims. One audience is seeking foundational knowledge within their chosen discipline, and the other is seeking knowledge outside their major discipline but intended to complement their specialization. A benefit of the distribution model is that it fits the specialization culture of the academy and thereby simplifies the administration of general education. The main idea of any distribution system is that the courses used to meet general education requirements are departmental courses. Distribution systems "finesse the problem of devising and administering general education" by leaving the task of "generating courses appropriate for the non-specialist up to the departments" (Menand, 2010, p. 27). Lewis (2006) describes distribution requirements as the "easy way out of the imperative for general education,

easy for both students and faculty" (p. 50). While the phrase "easy way out" may be overly critical, a clear strength of the distribution model is that it aligns with academic culture.

Finally, the distribution model aligns with the infrastructure in which general education expectations are identified by state systems. For example, the Tennessee Board of Regents System identifies 41 semester hours as "common general education requirements at the lower-division" for all baccalaureate degrees (Tennessee Board of Regents, n.d.). These 41 hours are based on subject categories in communication (9 credits), humanities and/or fine arts (9 semester hours), social and behavioral sciences (6 semester hours), history (6 semester hours), natural sciences (8 semester hours) and mathematics (3 semester hours). The idea that general education involves distribution of subjects is embedded in our educational structures.

In essence, the distribution model advances the aims of general education associated with breadth and exposure to a wide range of ideas and does so by requiring students to pick and choose among knowledge categories. This differs from the core model, which carves out a small piece of the curriculum but requires a great deal of coordination and consensus building in order to fill that piece. A third model, framed to advance competencies, specifically identifies skills and abilities that students should achieve and then designs a series of requirements to advance these aims.

Competency-Framed[10]. A third conceptual model of general education focuses on individual abilities and skills of learning and personal growth (Allen, 2006). The model involves a specially created set of general education objectives. A key distinction is that general education models that are framed around competency development focus on process rather than specific content (Katz, 2005).

Stanford University illustrates a general education model that centers on competency development. Stanford's requirements help students "develop a broad set of essential intellectual and social competencies that will be of enduring value" regardless of specific field of study (Stanford University, n.d.). General education requirements introduce students to the "intellectual life of the University" and serve "to foreground important questions and to illustrate how they may be approached from multiple perspectives."

Stanford students are required to take a specified number of courses within each of four areas of the general education curriculum: Thinking Matters, Ways of Thinking/Ways of Doing (WAYS), Writing and Rhetoric, and Foreign Language. The foundation of the Stanford general education curriculum is the Thinking Matters requirement for which the "main goal is to help students develop the ability to ask rigorous and genuine questions that can lead to scientific experimentation or literary interpretation or social policy analysis." Most Stanford students fulfill this requirement by taking a standalone, designated Thinking Matters seminar during their first year.

The WAYS requirement provides instruction in essential skills and capacities in the areas of aesthetic and interpretive inquiry, social inquiry, scientific method and analysis, formal reasoning, applied quantitative reasoning, engaging diversity, ethical reasoning, and creative expression. Students are required to take 11 certified WAYS courses, and are permitted to overlap general education courses as well as major requirements to meet this requirement.

Students also complete a Writing and Rhetoric requirement that is intended to develop their "abilities in analysis, academic argument, and research-based writing and oral presentation." One Writing and Rhetoric course is taken in the first year, a second in the sophomore year, and a third in the major. Finally, students have a Foreign Language requirement in which they must complete 1 year of college-level study in a foreign language.

The competency model of general education has a variety of benefits. Arguably, specific skills and abilities being advanced by general education are less controversial than specific content or academic disciplines. It would be rare to hear anyone suggest that strong writing or critical thinking is an unimportant component of a general education. Another benefit is the ability to overlap fluidly if not seamlessly with requirements in the major.

Some of the challenges of the competency development model of general education revolve around what then makes general education courses distinct or necessary beyond the major. After all, major requirements surely include writing and critical thinking. Another challenge, although not unique to this delivery model of general education, is that writing skills and critical thinking skills break down into a variety of subskills. Achieving consensus on where and by whom these are addressed in the curriculum can be a challenge. For

example, if writing skills are a requirement of first-year courses as well as embedded in a major requirement, what can faculty within the major anticipate will be covered in the first-year? Competency models require coordination and communication among faculty and administrators.

As one considers general education in the present, it is crucial to reiterate that these three models are purist prototypes. Most curricular models are not one or another, but rather align more closely with one model than with the others or deliver aspects of each of the three models in different ways.

Even the illustrations in this chapter have some elements of the other models of general education in their programs. For example, the Yale distribution requirements do not stand alone as curricular requirements outside the major. Yale students also must fulfill foundational competency requirements by taking two courses in quantitative reasoning and two courses in writing, as well as a year of foreign language. Even Columbia's renowned core curriculum is augmented with a distribution component within the general education program. At Columbia, the Frontiers of Science core course must be accompanied by two additional science courses in any natural science department to satisfy general education requirements. Even though a curriculum might be considered to be one of the three main general education models, it likely has elements of the other models.

As colleges and universities have revised and reframed their general education programs over time, a wide number of variations of general education have emerged. While these variations are infinite, they are shaped by current trends.

Trends and Variations on the Models

The distribution model is the most widely adopted model of general education (Allen, 2006; Hanstedt, 2012). At the same time, a distribution model is rarely used in isolation. A recent survey noted that only 15% of responding institutions had curricula with purely distributional attributes (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009). The same survey identified a trend in U.S. higher education to blend the strengths of the distribution model with integrative elements; 64% of colleges and universities reported

combining distributional elements with integrative features (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009). Some institutions have largely distribution-based delivery models of general education that include a core component or subset, for example. Such a design maintains both breadth and depth by facilitating disciplinary expertise alongside integrative elements. Curricular variations that reflect this trend toward integration are thematic strands, core-distribution, and core-distribution-competency.

Thematic Strands. One curricular model that illustrates the shift toward integration is the organization of disciplinary courses around a number of academically or socially relevant themes or topics (Flaherty, 2014; Hanstedt, 2012). Course offerings from across the disciplines are grouped into a broadly defined thematic strand that is a shared general education requirement.

The University of Minnesota illustrates this model in practice with its Designated Themes requirement. All "theme courses have the common goal of cultivating in students a number of habits of mind: thinking ethically about important challenges facing society and world; reflecting on the shared sense of responsibility required to build and maintain community; connecting knowledge and practice; fostering a stronger sense of our roles as historical agents" (University of Minnesota, n.d.). Designated themes are topics "central to an understanding of contemporary life," and their investigation prepares students to become "knowledgeable, ethical, and engaged public citizens." Students must complete one course in four of the five themes. The five themes are Civic Life and Ethics, Diversity and Social Justice in the United States, the Environment, Global Perspectives, and Technology and Society.

Each theme has specific criteria and a set of courses from across the university that are approved to fulfill that requirement. Courses approved to satisfy the Civic Life and Ethics requirement, for example, must present and define ethics and the role of ethics in civic life," explore "how ethical principles of a society or societies have developed … through group processes and debate," encourage students "to develop, defend, or challenge their personal values or beliefs," and provide students with "concrete opportunities to identify and apply their knowledge of ethics." A variety of academic disciplines are reflected in the courses approved to satisfy requirements, including

American Studies 2011: The United States Since September 2001; Arts 1002: Art and Life: Thinking About Ethics Through Art; History 3412: Soccer: Around the World With the Beautiful Game; Nursing 4402: Taking Ethical Action in Health Care; and French 3736: Human Nature From Descartes to Sade. In a thematic grouping model, courses from across the disciplinary spectrum apply specialized content to broad questions.

One strength of this model is that students are better able to make sense of the connections when courses are pulled together under relevant themes. Another benefit is that it clearly draws on the disciplinary expertise of faculty. Nonetheless, the model has its challenges.

Deciding on the themes can present a challenge (Flaherty, 2014). Moreover, course approval within thematic requirements necessitates administrative oversight and approval through committee. Cost can also be a concern. Faculty leadership for each thematic strand is typically compensated, often through a reduced teaching load, to ensure consistency, to assess the value of the theme, and to approve related courses (Flaherty, 2014).

Core-Distribution. Another model that exemplifies the trend toward integration is a core-distributional model in which distributional requirements are combined with core courses (Hanstedt, 2012). This may be accomplished through integrative foundations seminars, often targeted to first-year or sophomore-level students. Another avenue is to adopt upper-level capstone courses that ask students to reflect upon and synthesize their learning experiences (McGill, 2012). These integrative elements may be combined with a pure distribution model, thematic strands model, or a combination. Versions of this model vary widely, but share the merging of integrative courses with distribution requirements.

DePaul University illustrates this model in the way it combines a core component with a thematic strands model in constructing its general education program. The DePaul common core is a series of courses, required of all students, taken sequentially by students over the course of 4 years as they advance toward their degrees. The first-year program includes a Chicago Quarter course through which students learn about the foundational characteristics of DePaul, notably its Chicago setting and Vincentian identity. Students

take a seminar on Multiculturalism in the United States in the sophomore year, followed by a junior year Experiential Learning course and a senior year Capstone course.

The second component of the general education curriculum is framed by six "learning domains": Arts and Literature; Philosophical Inquiry; Religious Dimensions; Scientific Inquiry; Self, Society, and the Modern World; and Understanding the Past (DePaul University, n.d.). DePaul suggests that these areas reflect a "conventional liberal arts and sciences curriculum," but, in this curricular configuration, encourage students to "understand connections and see diverse applications." DePaul's model combines a core with a distribution element to achieve both integration as well as exposure to a breadth of disciplines.

Core-Distribution-Competency. All three elements—core, distribution, and competency—can also be intentionally blended. Pulling together the various models of general education and their respective aims is illustrated by Seattle Pacific University's general education program.

Seattle Pacific University's general education program consists of two main components: the common curriculum and the exploratory curriculum (Seattle Pacific University, n.d.). The common curriculum comprises eight required courses with prescribed, shared content spread over 4 years. These courses begin with University Seminar in the first year, University Core in the sophomore year, University Foundations in the junior year, and finally the senior year Capstone course that is embedded in the major. The exploratory curriculum consists of required distribution coursework in the arts, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics. Students complete the exploratory curriculum alongside the common curriculum. Moreover, these curricular elements exist alongside competency requirements in writing, foreign language, and mathematics.

Each element of Seattle Pacific's general education curriculum reflects a version of the three models of general education, and each component identifies the aims of that area. The common curriculum lends itself to shared content and integration, the exploratory curriculum to breadth of learning, and the competency requirements to the advancement of skills and abilities.

Contemporary Insights

As one looks across these models, the complexity of examining delivery models of general education becomes more evident. The core and distribution models both purport to advance broad learning, but do so in divergent ways. Moreover, the core and distribution models certainly advance individual competencies. At the same time, as one looks across the various models, one can discern the various functions being advanced by general education in the contemporary higher education context. Finally, innovations on the prototypical models attempt to mitigate the challenges associated with these models in their purist form. In the next chapter, an even wider variety of programmatic initiatives and their contributions to general education in the present will be identified and described.

Effective General Education in the Current Context

EFFECTIVE GENERAL EDUCATION requires examining the pieces that can be pulled together to construct an effective program that provides students with a general education. Moreover, the contexts for achieving general education aims have broadened. Advancing general education today is not limited to the so-called general education curriculum but extends to how general education outcomes are achieved in the major disciplines as well as in cocurricular contexts.

The chapter begins with an examination of good practices overall for general education, turns to innovative structural elements of general education programs, and finally describes effective practices that support and sustain general education.

Characteristics of Good Practice on the Whole

Oftentimes, models and structures for delivering general education are debated in isolation from conversation regarding broader information as to what constitutes effective general education. The literature identifies a number of critical factors to address when designing general education programs. These factors matter regardless of the specific structures used to implement general education; pointedly, attending to these variables is crucial to successful implementation of any particular program.

Institution-Specific

No perfect general education model works for all institutions. In fact, if the best-designed, perfectly constructed general education program were picked up and placed into another institution it would suddenly be imperfect. A well-designed general education program reflects particular institutional mission and identity. General education must be designed around each institution's culture, the qualities and interests of its faculty, and the particular needs of its students (Gaff, 1980; Rountree, Tolbert, & Zerwas, 2010). Good practice in general education begins by understanding one's institution well and considering carefully what is appropriate in that context.

General education has a long history in higher education; it also has a long history in each institution. Understanding the historical trajectory of general education at the particular institution is crucial. Considering how faculty understand general education and make meaning of its perceived benefits and pitfalls is vital. Any curricular revision that neglects to account for faculty sense-making is doomed to a long-standing debate or to approval by a narrow margin, only to be undercut over time by naysayers who were edged out in the governance process. General education programs must be recognized as growing from the mission and history of that institution to be renewed and sustained.

Intentional

General education requires a great deal of intentionality; effectiveness demands looking inward at the institutional context and outward at societal needs and external body expectations. Moreover, general education programs must focus on students' learning needs. Intentionality is particularly important given the cross-institutional and interdepartmental context in which general education plays out (Allen, 2006; Penn, 2011a, 2011b).

Moreover, intentionality is critical given the multiple programmatic avenues for advancing general education. Delivering general education is not limited to traditional curricular structures but includes a variety of programs in and out of the classroom (Leskes, 2003). General education requires careful understanding of institutional mission and embedding these educational priorities into overall program design and into course design.

Finally, intentionality extends to incorporating any institutional initiatives that advance general education objectives, including but not limited to cocurricular programs. The wide variety of venues for delivering general education make attention to coherence more critical as well.

Coherence

As noted in the previous chapter, the need for a central coherent thread in undergraduate education is not a new concern. Similarly, the idea that general education provides an important opportunity for institutions of higher learning to maintain a central coherent thread is not a novel suggestion (Boyer, 1979, 1981c; Johnson & Ratcliff, 2004). However, the context in which general education plays out today requires new attention to coherence.

Higher education is pulled in disintegrated directions, whether students are attending multiple institutions or experiencing courses with adjunct faculty who often are disconnected from the institutions in which they are teaching. In a world where centrifugal forces are pulling pieces of higher education apart, general education can serve as a force for putting things together (Wells, 2015b).

General education also requires looking externally at societal needs and quite specifically at the expectations of external bodies, including regional accrediting associations and state system regulations. Finally, general education plays a key role in shaping students' engagement in their education (Bowen, 2004). Indeed, general education contributes greatly to the advancement of a well-structured educational program that creates the conditions for student success (Kuh et al., 2005). Making sure that general education is coherent and not simply a smattering of requirements and courses is tedious and important work (Flaherty, 2014).

Integrative

General education today requires integrative thinking and design. It is not adequate to consider general education a precursor to the major. Rather, more integrated thinking between general education and the major is necessary (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; Gaston, 2015;

Hanstedt, 2012; National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007). The aims traditionally considered the domain of general education courses are also advanced in major courses (Aloi, Gardner, & Lusher, 2003; Eder, 2004). General education must not be considered foundational but rather should run throughout a 4-year curriculum (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015). As such, students are able to develop the skills associated with general education throughout their time in college and to practice these skills repeatedly at increasingly complex and intellectually demanding levels.

Further, general education curricula should enable students to synthesize seemingly disparate experiences. College students pull together their personal lives, major experiences, cocurricular involvements, and employment experiences; general education should offer a means for making sense of these various components. Moreover, general education can help students improve in their ability to be successful in these various arenas.

Innovative, While Building on Strengths

Good practice in general education requires thinking outside the traditional curricular box. If an institution's vision for general education is limited to a separate and isolated subset of courses outside the major, the ability for general education to achieve its aims is hindered. Today's general education models are fulfilled through a wide variety of educational contexts, including but not limited to coursework. Internships, study abroad programs, residence hall programs, campus lectures, and the like are all places in which general education functions may be fulfilled (Boyer & Levine, 1981; Hanstedt, 2012; Kuh, 2008; Wells, 2014, 2015a).

These broad commitments and expectations are important anchors for general education design and ongoing revision. Beyond these ideals, an institution must specifically examine the elements that effectively build the overall design of a general education program. Moreover, higher education leaders can consider a variety of innovative practices that advance general education objectives necessary to the contemporary context.

Innovations in General Education

A wide array of design elements may be considered in the initial design of a general education program or used as elements to enhance a current model. Any one of these elements can make for an effective component of a general education program, but none of them will be effective without being strategically adapted to fit the particular institutional mission and context.

Common Text Programs

A growing number of colleges and universities have adopted common text programs, often as part of a first-year experience initiative (Ferguson, 2006; Laufgraben, 2006). Typically, all members of the incoming class are assigned to read the same book prior to arriving on campus in the fall. Such programs are reminiscent of early college curricula and early 20th century general education reforms in which all students read the same books; however, common text programs advance aims that address contemporary concerns.

Today's common text programs are modest versions of a core curriculum that push academic rigor and encourage a sense of academic community. For example, at Wright State University (Dayton, OH), the common reading program aims to expose students to the university's academic atmosphere and to provide a "common academic experience for all first-year students by giving [them] the opportunity to engage with [their] peers in intellectual discussions both inside and outside the classroom" (Wright State University, n.d.). Common texts are one means by which general education aims are achieved in the contemporary context.

Common Curriculum

The common curriculum is another general education component that generatively advances general education aims in the current context of higher education. The aim of the common curriculum—a modest subset of the educational program that is shared by all students—is intended neither to replace distribution requirements nor to negate or usurp the major. Rather, its aim is to provide a space of integration, a connective network of relationships across the educational experience.

As one illustration, the common curriculum at the College of Saint Benedict aims to "provide all students with a solid academic foundation and the fundamental tools necessary to continue developing their intellectual ability and inquiry through a broad liberal arts education" (College of Saint Benedict, n.d.). The Common Curriculum is completed by fulfilling six interdisciplinary requirements. Students complete the First-Year Seminar, which is two sequential courses designed to "help students further their skills in critical thinking, speaking and writing" and an upper level Ethics Common Seminar designed to "help students develop the ability to recognize ethical issues, examine them from multiple perspectives and articulate reasoned arguments that support and facilitate responsible decision-making" (College of Saint Benedict, n.d.). The common curriculum includes an experiential learning requirement in which students must "demonstrate the ability to integrate and apply academic knowledge and skills gained from activities that extend beyond the traditional classroom" (College of Saint Benedict, n.d.). Finally, the common curriculum requires one course that addresses gender issues and another course that examines intercultural issues. The common curriculum requirements at Saint Benedict stand alongside disciplinary-based requirements within the general education program.

E-Portfolios

E-portfolios are a design element that institutions have adopted to facilitate the integration of academic content, experience, and reflection (Chen & Light, 2010). An e-portfolio is an online collection of artifacts from a student's coursework and cocurricular experiences. The format requires the student to reflect on how the varied educational experiences connect to each other, to the student's attainment of institutional learning objectives, and to the student's own future aspirations and goals (Chen & Light, 2010; Hanstedt, 2012). Students add examples of their work, including papers, projects, and activities, to their portfolio website. The material comes from general education and major courses as well as undergraduate research, internships, and cocurricular experiences. Students then engage in reflective critique by synthesizing their experiences, making connections across their work, and reflecting upon the development of their own learning.

The e-portfolio is good pedagogy for achieving general education–related outcomes. As students complete their e-portfolios, they make meaning of their education (Chen & Light, 2010). Meta-analysis helps students understand themselves by enabling them to recognize their skills, identify areas for improvement, and clarify what techniques have led them to quality work (Hanstedt, 2012; Suskie, 2009). Another benefit of the e-portfolio is that it facilitates assessment in that educators can extract a subset of these portfolios, either students at a particular level (sophomores, seniors) or an assignment within a course. Institutions benefit by understanding the actual outcomes of their educational programs and making sense of what works and what does not work in advancing the mission of general education.

Learning Communities

Learning communities are another method for integration of course content and experience. A learning community entails coenrolling a group of students in a number of courses with related topics that are offered during the same term. Students fulfill multiple general education requirements by taking courses across disciplines; students are able to "compare how the fields vary in their approach to the same topic" and are provided with the opportunity for "greater synthesis and understanding" (Hanstedt, 2012, p. 15). For example, students may participate in a learning community whose theme is "Law and Society." These students are coenrolled in courses such as political science, economics, and sociology that intersect with queries regarding how laws impact social well-being. Students often participate in a small seminar with a faculty member or peer educator who helps them wrestle with questions that cut across courses.

Sometimes learning communities add a residential component in that the students enrolled in the common set of courses also live together in the same residence hall. This model facilitates relationships that focus on learning as well as allows residence educators to intentionally connect their programming with the objectives of the learning community and its various courses.

Regardless of the particular model, students are connected to each other and to course content in such a way as to help them make sense of the intersections.

Capstone Experiences

Capstone courses and projects provide "culminating experiences" that require students nearing the end of their undergraduate years to complete a substantive work that integrates and applies what they have learned (Kuh, 2008). Examples of capstone projects may include a research paper, performance, or art exhibit. What makes capstones a good practice of general education is the manner in which they enable students to make connections and synthesize their undergraduate experiences.

The preceding examples are illustrative rather than an exhaustive list of structural elements for considering innovative general education design and revision. Common text programs, common learning curricular, e-portfolios, learning communities, and capstone experiences advance the integrative expectations for general education in the current context (Leskes, 2003).

The point is to reimagine what programmatic elements potentially contribute to the aims of a general education program while also remaining faithful to the culture of a particular institution. I do not mean to suggest that adopting any of these specific elements is germane to an effective general education program. Some of these elements will simply not fit the culture of some colleges and universities. Moreover, considering educational elements on any particular campus that are in place and may be revitalized and reconceptualized as advancing the learning outcomes associated with general education will be generative.

The one element of good general education practice that crosses all campuses is not to simply think structurally but also to extend a critical eye to general education at the course level.

Effective General Education Course Design

Effective general education considers design at the course level, not only the overall institutional curricular design. This requires recognizing the varied aims of general education courses, and aligning the design with the

specific general education purpose or purposes that the course is intended to achieve.

For example, some general education courses function as a type of "standard 101" course with the intent to "introduce students to basic concepts and philosophies of the field" (Hanstedt, 2012, p. 46). There is typically little variation from section to section or across institutions, and the course is taught by a professor within his or her discipline. Courses fitting this model should adapt somehow to the various learning needs of students, some being students taking the course as the foundation to their major whereas others have enrolled to be exposed to the discipline's concepts and methodologies as part of their general education distribution requirements.

A second type of general education course maintains a distributional philosophy and concern for "exposing students to the thinking of the field but with more deliberate attention to matters of integration" (Hanstedt, 2012, p. 46). Such a course provides grounding in a discipline but is driven by deeper engagement with key concepts of the field, connections to institutional themes, and relevance to students' lives rather than disciplinary coverage.

Finally, there is the integrated general education course that meets a "shared set of standards and expectations and perhaps even practices and assignments" (Hanstedt, 2012, p. 48). This type of course, typically part of a larger core or common curriculum, requires conscious attention to design and ongoing collaboration in order to maintain the course's integrative aims and common objectives.

While course designs are varied, general education requires connecting academic and social contexts of students' lives in light of the broader goals of institutional mission and the general education curriculum, and making sure these broader goals are evident at the course level. General education should contain intellectually and academically demanding material and push students toward high standards (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; Hanstedt, 2012). Maintaining the rigor of a course is crucial to advancing the purposes and fundamental commitments of a general education.

Design components, at the program or course level, must be complemented by practices that sustain the program over time.

Effective Practices to Support and Sustain General Education

General education, consistent with all curricula in higher education, requires intentional practices and systems to ensure its effectiveness. However, the aims of general education must be attended to within and beyond the typical structures for enhancing teaching and learning.

Faculty Development

Faculty development is necessary throughout the general education curriculum development and assessment cycle (Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009). General education course design and faculty development must intentionally align. Faculty should be supported in comprehending the contexts of students' lives, including their academic, personal, and social environment in order to tailor course design and program development to students' learning needs and motivations. The particular aims for student learning must be considered, including the needs of varying student audiences.

Faculty often teach a similar topic to major and nonmajor students; they should understand that the "difference between a general education course and a major course covering the same topic is less about what information is provided to students than what students are asked to do with the information" (Hanstedt, 2012, p. 54). Faculty should comprehend how the learning objectives of their courses fit into the overall aims of the institution's general education program. Finally, a greater level of integration requires a proportionate level of interdisciplinary and interdivisional conversation and development. The forces of overspecialization work against integration in the academy (Selingo, 2013; Taylor, 2010). Whereas faculty feel at home sharing their disciplinary expertise, many venture outside their comfort zone teaching general education (Bresciani, 2007; Furman, 2013). It is important to counteract these forces without diminishing the value of the academic discipline. Added incentives and clarity around the value of general education as well as intentional and ongoing efforts in faculty development are necessary to avoid the tendency to pull away from the integrative aims of general education.

Faculty Rewards

Thinking about general education in light of faculty rewards is also crucial. Redesigning courses requires a level of intellectual focus and concentration commensurate to that which faculty apply in labs, teaching, and research (Furman, 2013). Curricular development can provide faculty with some of the same intrinsic rewards as their other work, including opportunities for new insight and for cultivating intellectual curiosity (Hanstedt, 2012). Encouraging faculty to think anew about audience and learning goals, potentiates new insights for effective teaching in the general education context.

While the intrinsic rewards associated with general education are helpful to consider, it is also important that formal rewards systems align with the aims of general education. Equipping faculty for general education requires aligning the rewards for good work with the aims of the general education program. While it is important that faculty not be penalized for general education course teaching (e.g., when evaluations sink simply because students lack interest in a course outside their major), it is also critical that faculty be held accountable to teaching well in general education.

Tenure and promotion guidelines should value good teaching in and beyond the major. In preparing dossiers for promotion and tenure, faculty should be asked to reflect on their teaching in light of disciplinary aims but also in light of the aims of the general education program. General education requires a scholarship of integration (Boyer, 1990; Braxton, Luckey, & Helland, 2002; Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997). That is, general education requires interdisciplinary connections as well as facilitating intersections between learning and life.

Equipping Cocurricular Educators

Some general education values can be advanced through cocurricular programs (Bresciani, 2007). Intentionally connecting out-of-class activities with curricular aims makes these activities more educationally purposeful (American College Personnel Association, 1996; Kuh et al., 2005). Cocurricular educators should be equipped to advance general education learning outcomes in cocurricular contexts.

Toward this end, educators outside the classroom must have professional development opportunities that enable them to understand and connect to the general education program. Better understanding of these elements allows cocurricular educators to intentionally augment and extend the aims of general education into cocurricular programs and the campus ethos.

Cocurricular educators should be oriented to the broad objectives of the general education program as well as the curricular structures that advance these objectives. Internships, leadership programs, and community service all have opportunities to advance particular aims of general education. Study abroad programs facilitate general education outcomes associated with global awareness and intercultural competence (Tajes & Ortiz, 2010). Moreover, college environments such as residence halls serve as spaces in which learning is cultivated both actively, as in programs, and passively, through messaging in common spaces. Understanding the particular objectives for general education allows educators outside the classroom to tap into these objectives and to design programs that fulfill these aims. Moreover, cocurricular educators will be better able to help students comprehend the purposes of general education.

Attention to the importance of ongoing development for faculty and cocurricular educators requires justifying the resources that go into such development. There are institutional benefits to an effective general education program. Conversation across divisions, departments, and disciplines cultivates a shared vision of education across campus. Communication and clear expectations are imperative when engaging educational practices that bridge the curricular and cocurricular (Whitt et al., 2008). Moreover, as new faculty and cocurricular educators join the community, ongoing development helps these educators understand the college or university and how the mission is advanced through general education.

Devoting resources to ongoing development helps the general education curriculum as well as related courses and programs stay consistent with their initial intent. Such development helps avoid the need for a full-fledged curricular revision every 10 years as educators turn over and as institutional memory fades (Hanstedt, 2012). Moreover, ongoing development goes hand in hand with continuous improvement of general education.

General education is heavily shaped by institutional and broader contexts. Ownership and delivery of general education span varying departments. Faculty values traditionally privilege the ideals of general education associated with building academic skills as well as connecting to their disciplines (Ferren & Kinch, 2003). Other ideals for general education, such as holistic education, are values appreciated by student affairs educators. Administrators tend toward general education's contributions to strengthening institutional identity (Ferren & Kinch, 2003). Attending to the collective aims of general education requires bridging these constituencies and their perspectives.

Moreover, general education involves the office of institutional research (data analysis) as well as oversight by institutional governing bodies (faculty senate, general education committee) and external bodies (state regulation, regional accrediting bodies). General education is influenced by many contexts and expectations; recognizing these varied influences is crucial to navigating and renewing general education.

Institutional Assessment and General Education

Accountability for student learning is a driving force behind much of general education renewal in the current context (Allen, 2006; Bastedo, 2011; Ewell, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Assessment in general education is an expectation of each of the regional accrediting bodies. General education's explicit interconnection with institutional assessment of student learning is an emerging recognition of the symbiotic relationship between general education and larger college learning outcomes. Moreover, attention to assessment in general education specifically has proliferated (Allen, 2006; Banta, 2007; Ewell, 2004; Finley, 2012; Hanson & Mohn, 2011).

Closer alignment between general education and assessment is illustrated in the renaming of an annual AAC&U Network for Academic Renewal conference; previously titled "General Education", the conference was renamed "General Education and Assessment" in February 2001 to reflect this synergy. Clarifying general education's connection explicitly to broader institutional

aims for student learning is a benefit of aligning general education and assessment (Ewell, 2004). Such alignment requires clarifying and clearly communicating how general education fulfills institutional mission and values (Leskes, 2003; Bresciani, 2007; Fuess & Mitchell, 2011). While there are benefits to this synergy, this also places together two tasks that faculty have traditionally been less enthusiastic about (Hanstedt, 2012).

The national landscape is dotted with assessment expectations for general education. Multiple agents influence both means of assessment and interpretation of related data. Nationally normed surveys are conducted to evaluate skills, attitudes, and values (e.g., College Student Survey, National Survey of Student Engagement). Standardized examinations that evaluate critical thinking and communication, such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment and the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, help determine attainment of general education–related outcomes. Assessment instruments have been developed by testing organizations (e.g., American College Testing Organization) as well as higher education research groups (e.g., Higher Education Research Institute, National Survey of Student Engagement). The various evaluative frames surrounding general education are reflected in these instrument, making clear communication around general education an even higher priority.

Many champion the importance of communicating a shared general education mission and related student learning outcomes to all constituencies, including students, parents, faculty, cocurricular educators, administrative leaders, and board members (Allen, 2006; Banta et al., 2009; Ewell, 2004). A shared mission and related expectations for student learning are foundational to assessment practice (Suskie, 2009). General education assessment helps "all departments (administrative and academic) understand how they contribute to the general education student learning outcomes" (Bresciani, 2007, p. 14). Communication and shared vision are indeed critical; however, general education assessment faces unique challenges in meeting these expectations given the divergent assumptions that surround general education.

The central difficulty in assessing general education stems from the challenge to define this element of the educational program (Furman, 2013). As noted in the preceding chapters, general education's educational

functions have expanded over the history of U.S. higher education and today include well-roundedness, critical thinking, meaning making, civic responsibility, global understanding, and equity-mindedness. These goals are commendable but can be overwhelming. Moreover, many of these goals "do not lend themselves readily to measurement" (p. 130). Some long-standing assumptions of general education, such as the notion that exposure to diverse disciplinary perspectives advances critical thinking, have not been empirically demonstrated (Furman, 2013).

Research examining undergraduate learning outcomes in light of particular associations' strategic purposes is also evident on the assessment terrain (e.g., Association of American Colleges and Universities, Association of State Colleges and Universities, Council for Independent Colleges). These various voices contextualize data for multiple constituencies and disseminate their findings through conferences, publications, and social media (Furman, 2013). Institutions have to not only navigate a wide variety of messages but also determine which of the many surveys to administer to their students, as well as consider when and how to do so.

Furman (2013) identifies a primary limitation of these assessment mechanisms in the context of general education by noting that the "summative and aggregated data provide an institutional snapshot but do not foster the taking of responsibility for student intellectual growth" (p. 133). This is particularly problematic given the critical role that has been outlined for faculty in carrying out assessment activities (Banta et al., 2009; Suskie, 2009). Assessment of general education is further complicated by the frequently disaggregated approach to general education delivery. For example, general education courses are often delivered within a highly distributed context that collectively makes up a general education curriculum (Furman, 2013).

Embedding assessment in general education courses has been identified as an effective practice that increases the likelihood that course assignments align well with the aims, content, and learning objectives of the course and the larger general education program (Hanstedt, 2012). Embedded forms of assessment in general education provide an avenue toward increased effectiveness in that they encourage colleges and universities to intentionally connect the places where abilities and skills are taught (Ewell, 2004). Such a process

also brings assessment of general education closer to the activities of faculty (Furman, 2013).

Assessment in general education extends beyond the classroom and the curriculum. General education assessment not only verifies that learning transcends the classroom but also demonstrates how that learning occurs in and through the cocurricular experiences (Bresciani, 2007). Given the various mechanisms for delivering general education, particular practices are necessary for ensuring that program designs are directly connected to mission and learning outcomes. For example, mapping general education delivery to desired outcomes has been identified as an avenue to align general education aims to delivery mechanisms (Bresciani, 2007; Ewell, 2004; Maki, 2004).

Assessment of general education is charged with a variety of responsibilities and expectations. Assessment should allow a general education program to evolve in generative ways (Gaston et al., 2010; Walvoord, 2010). General education assessment has also been identified as a means not only to improve programs but also to craft professional development opportunities for those who deliver general education (Farmer, 2007; Hanstedt, 2012). Penn (2011b) suggests that a "primary purpose for implementing assessment of general education is to draw inferences about curricula, cocurricular experiences, and teaching practices so as to develop improvement strategies" (p. 112). Just as general education suffers from ever-increasing expectations, so too does the assessment of general education.

Clarity of assessment goals will help institutions mitigate confusion regarding various paradigms of general education (Bresciani, 2007). Efforts toward increasing clarity may involve not only comprehending current aims but also unlearning previous perceptions of general education. For example, general education may historically have been utilized and understood as serving only to expose students to learning outside the discipline—an approach that remains prominent in the literature even as the lines between general education and the major blur (Aloi et al., 2003). Expanding the aims of general education beyond this narrow perspective will be crucial for equipping faculty and cocurricular educators to advance general education aims.

In sum, general education assessment struggles with the same concerns regarding coherence and intentionality that have long plagued general education. Higher education "cannot measure what we cannot define" (Furman, 2013, p. 135). As a result, attending to clarity in general education is paramount for achieving the effective assessment of general education. Moreover, high expectations for general education programs require "equally ambitious" and clear visions for assessment of general education (Leskes & Wright, 2005, p. 5).

Sustaining and Renewing General Education

A wide variety of strategies exist for advancing and renewing general education. The expanding list of general education strategies is beneficial; at the same time, it potentiates further confusion as to what is meant by general education. It is crucial to consider how any one of these strategies may be adapted in order to fit well in the culture and existing educational program of a particular institution. Moreover, while program improvement may focus on particular elements at specific points in time, an effective general education program requires a network of interconnected strategies. Curriculum design, educator development, and assessment initiatives must interweave in order to advance the aims of effective general education in a particular college or university.

Closing Reflections and Recommendations

GENERAL EDUCATION HAS a long and in many ways esteemed history in U.S. higher education. Over the course of four centuries, the purposes and practices of general education have evolved while maintaining iconic status representing what it means to be an educated person. General education is the largest educational program offered in U.S. higher education (Gaston, 2015). Nevertheless, there is no consensus around general education's definition (Bastedo, 2002; Furman, 2013; Glyler & Weeks, 1998; Menand, 2010). Moreover, the value of general education is sometimes questioned (Eagan, Lozano, Hurtado, & Case, 2014; Ripley, 2012). General education is an enduring albeit amorphous ideal.

The various and competing priorities placed on general education complicate efforts to realize the aims cherished by higher education in the United States. General education faces a wide variety of perspectives as to its import and purpose; these expectations shape priorities in divergent ways and often in ways that compete with each other. Some value general education because it purports to provide well-roundedness, whereas others affirm exposure to multiple disciplines. Some value general education for helping students advance meaning making, and others find no meaning in general education at all.

Even as greater clarity matters to general education renewal efforts, one must realize that general education is necessarily context-laden and dynamic. While some of the perennial questions of general education persist, such as the nature and necessity of the prescribed college curriculum, general

education has more recently been heavily influenced by concerns regarding access, affordability, and accountability (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; Bastedo, 2011). It is crucial to recognize that general education necessarily responds to the world in which we live while also respecting the ideals of general education that have advanced over time. Such faithfulness requires revising conceptions and perhaps jettisoning some notions that work against general education. Requisite modification alongside enduring ideals must be held in tension as one navigates the terrain of general education.

The narrative of general education today is one of adaptation and addition. General education has endured a great deal of change over the course of U.S. higher education's history, and emerging conceptions of general education are evident in the present. The concept has been long touted as a way to augment specialized study (Harvard University Committee, 1945; Packard, 1829). However, recent work has attended to the ways that general education and specialized study interconnect rather than diverge (Gaston, 2015).

An interconnected view of general education's purpose with specialized study is an adaptation of the present tailored to a new era of global interdependence and rapid technological change (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007). Realizing general education's purpose as we move into the future requires considering this synergy even as we respect the ideals that have long animated general education.

General Education: A Term of Endurance

The term "general education" has endured since its 19th-century introduction (Levine, 1978; Packard, 1829). Some of the ideals it evokes in the United States context date back to Harvard's founding in the 17th century. Whereas a lack of shared understanding continues to be problematic, general education remains the most prominent term for an education that transcends professional preparation. The term has "practical advantage" as the phrase used most often by accrediting bodies, journals, and government agencies (Bowen, 2004, p. 31). Because it is most widely recognizable, the phrase "general education"

helps to identify the variety of curricula intended to fulfill similar functions across colleges and universities in the United States. At the same time, lack of clarity regarding general education hinders renewal efforts (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1977; Gaston & Gaff, 2009). Lack of clarity is not, however, general education's sole challenge in the present.

General education is resource-intensive in a context where fiscal matters weigh heavy. General education courses are often assigned to adjunct or contingent faculty (Furman, 2013). New patterns in student mobility mean that institutions cannot depend on tuition income from entry-level general education that may be diverted to other institutions (Blumenstyk, 2015). Faculty development, assessment, and curricular revision are just some of the resource-intensive activities necessary to support general education.

General education also works against academic culture. The integrative aspects of general education do not lend themselves to faculty tenure and promotion in the academy's overspecialized culture (Braxton, 2015). General education is typically perceived as the sole domain of the curricular, thereby limiting the contributions of cocurricular education in realizing general education's purposes.

Finally, no one owns general education, but everyone has a stake in it. As such, changing general education is difficult to navigate and requires persistence and intentionality. The deep complexities facing the nation's largest educational program need to be more fully recognized.

Recommendations

The following recommendations illustrate possibilities for research and practice toward more fully realizing the goals of general education:

- *Public policy.* Qualitative concerns regarding the intentions and coherence of general education need to be part of the public policy agenda (Finkelstein, 2005). General education aims need to be examined within a cross-institutional context (Penn, 2011a). General education must not be bound to any single element of the college curriculum if it is to impact students' education in the current context.

- *Institutional Identity and Mission.* Just as general education serves as a means to differentiating the hallmarks of a college graduate in the United States, it also serves as a means to institutional differentiation. General education is a generative avenue for imprinting institutional identity on the curriculum. This is something that institutions should realize and take advantage of in today's competitive higher education marketplace. The state and purpose of general education within institutional types is an area worthy of further examination. There are unique characteristics of general education at historically Black colleges and universities (Jones, 2010). Examining general education within a context of a wide range of institutional types, including women's colleges, faith-based institutions, community colleges, and research institutions, will advance the ability to home in on how general education advances institutional purposes.
- *Educational leaders.* Educational leaders need to better understand and communicate to their students and prospective students the value and elements of general education (Bresciani, 2007; Rhodes, 2010a). Student understanding of the purpose of general education is a precursor to their engagement in this element of the educational program (Bowen, 2004; Shoenberg, 2015). Explicit communication to students about general education and what it is trying to accomplish in the particular institutional context is crucial if new messages regarding general education are to stick amid so many competing conceptions.
- *Theoretical Frameworks.* The term "general education" is tossed around as if it were one entity when, as this text has demonstrated, general education actually reflects a wide variety of outcomes that are achieved through different curricular and cocurricular programs that occur within and across institutional contexts (Bresciani, 2007). General education research should not only advance a broad vision of this ideal but also disaggregate the aims associated with general education.
- *Constituency Comprehension.* Further, one needs to understand how faculty actually experience general education and to consider new connections between general education values and faculty culture. One also needs to better understand how students make their course choices and the consequences of those choices (Ewell, 2004).

- *Delivery models.* Research should examine models of general education delivery, including distribution, core, and competency-framed models, in order to better understand their distinct contributions to achieving various aims of general education and their respective adoption in diverse institutional contexts.
- *Assessment.* Research and practice must emphasize new developments in general education assessment that fit the societal and educational context. Assessment should attend to both assessment of specific general education outcomes (Finley, 2012) as well as nationally normed data.
- *Cocurricular education.* Educational practitioners outside the classroom should reexamine the ways their particular areas connect to and advance general education outcomes. Student affairs practitioners, as one illustration, should recognize that holistic development concerns, traditionally a value in their field, are also a general education concern.

In the end, conceptions of general education are both lasting and yet particular to social and educational context. General education is both perennial and dynamic, thus requiring ongoing consideration and renewal. Reconsidering conceptions of general education as well as the various avenues to achieving general educational outcomes will richly contribute to achieving the aims for higher education as we move into the future.

Notes

1. Logic, grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy have historically been identified as liberal arts. The notion of liberal arts predates the notion of academic disciplines. Roche (2010) argues that the liberal arts have broadened to include the arts and sciences; Deresiewicz (2014) suggests that the liberal arts now encompass the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. While a number of subjects have claimed liberal arts status, there is no consensus as to which fields are liberal arts (Glyler & Weeks, 1998).

2. The term "liberal education" has a complex history. For a comprehensive and thoughtful history of this concept, see Kimball (1986).

3. The community college advances general education in important ways, both as an avenue in and of itself and also in its interface with the 4-year higher education institution.

4. The author wishes to acknowledge Kelly Ward's (2003) text, *Faculty Service Roles and the Scholarship of Engagement*, for the idea to frame this chapter in this way.

5. The year 2005 serves as the closing of this historical narrative largely because the present period, covered in the third chapter, can be dated back to the U.S. Department of Education's (2006) report, *A test of leadership: Charting the future of U.S. higher education*.

6. Essential knowledge was outlined as seven themes purported to be universally experienced and delivered across the 4 years. These themes were (1) Language: The crucial connection, (2) Art: The esthetic dimension, (3) Heritage: The living past, (4) Institutions: The social web, (5) Nature: Ecology of the planet, (6) Work: The value of vocation, and (7) Identity: The search for meaning (Boyer, 1988, pp. 19–33).

7. *Integrity in the College Curriculum* recommended nine aspects of a required curriculum: (1) inquiry, abstract logical thinking; (2) literacy—writing, reading, speaking, listening; (3) understanding numerical data; (4) historical consciousness; (5) science; (6) values; (7) art; (8) international and multicultural experiences; and (9) study in depth.

8. The *50 Hours* report defined essential areas of knowledge to include Culture and Civilizations (18 hours), Foreign Language (12 hours), Concepts of Mathematics (6 hours), Foundations of Natural Science (8 hours), and Social Sciences in the Modern World (6 hours).

9. Miller (1988) and Allen (2006) use the language "individual development" in framing this model, reflecting a philosophy of human development. I use the term "competency development" because it communicates a similar focus on personal, human development but more accurately conveys the distinction of this model from the core and distribution models.

10. Competency-framed models of general education should not be confused with competency-based degrees. A competency-based degree is an "academic credential awarded for demonstrated competency rather than for the accumulation of credit hours through taking courses" (Lumina Foundation, 2014, p. 44). A competency-framed model of general education frames learning outcomes around identified skills, abilities, and capacities within an undergraduate educational program.

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