

What's in a Name?

The Persistence of “General Education”

By **Stephen H. Bowen**, senior fellow, Association of American Colleges and Universities

Essentially every contemporary American college and university requires that undergraduate students complete a common “general education” curriculum, regardless of the student’s major or area of specialization. In the words of one regional accrediting body, this is “a coherent general education requirement consistent with the institution’s mission and designed to ensure breadth of knowledge and to promote intellectual inquiry” (North Central Association 1997).

Comprising about 25 to 50 percent of the academic credits required for a baccalaureate degree, this coursework and the learning it is intended to produce help to distinguish graduates as baccalaureate-educated persons as the institution defines that concept.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, curricula taught at American colleges and universities began to diversify through addition of a requirement in each student’s program of study for a major area of concentration. This was sometimes titled “special education.” The title “general education” came into wide use early in the twentieth century to identify that part of the curriculum that was not the major (Kimball 1995). The meaning of this title became sig-

nificantly more specific as a result of the work of the Harvard Committee on General Education. Published in 1945, *General Education for a Free Society* set out specific goals in the education of every student to be addressed in a shared, coherent, purposeful general education curriculum. The committee proposed a combination of required core and elective distribution courses, with instruction in writing embedded in the curriculum. Today, most general education programs at colleges and universities across the nation contain these elements.

Conceptions of general education were further developed and defined through the extensive reform efforts of the 1980s and 1990s, which resulted in greater aspirations and substantially increased enthusiasm for the potential and importance of general education. Colleges and universities better articulated their commitment to breadth with integration and purpose with coherence throughout the common curriculum. Many institutions developed pedagogies, content, and structures that were distinctive of their goals and identity.

Although the term “general education” referred to a widely understood distinction when it first came into use, many in the academy today believe this label does not

effectively communicate either the purposes and goals of their current curriculum or their aspirations for this part of the educational program. What are some of the alternative titles, and what might each imply? Does one or more of the alternatives better communicate our aspirations for this facet of the undergraduate experience than does “general education”? If so, why does this name persist to such an extent?

Rob Mauldin, director of general education at Shawnee State University in Ohio, informally surveyed the variety of titles given to general education curricula at 200 colleges and universities. He found that although 67 percent use the descriptor “general,” other titles are also in wide use. The term “core” was used by 20 percent, “university” by 8 percent, and “liberal” by 7 percent.*

We academics are careful about our words. Each alternative has something different to say about the purpose of this segment of the educational program, and different audiences are likely to interpret the labels differently. An important factor in the success of any curriculum is communicating its purpose to students, so it matters which we choose. What are the implications of these commonly used labels, and how well do they communicate what we mean?

* These add up to 102 percent because some curriculum titles include more than one of these words.

Although “general” is the most widely used, it is also the least informative. Apart from “not specific,” and thus not focused in a single area of study, the term is vague and may be assumed by some to indicate a lack of intentionality. Others will make the association with the common use of “general” to connote introductory-level material—as in “general biology”—and may conclude that the “general education” curriculum is preliminary to specialization in the major. The name “general education” has a practical advantage; it is the term most widely used in higher education, including by accrediting bodies, journals, and government agencies. Also, as the most readily recognized name, “general education” helps to accurately identify the variety of curricula intended to play similar roles at American colleges and universities.

Many will appreciate the fact that “core,” the second most common descriptor, implies the centrality of this part of the undergraduate experience in terms of structure, function, and goals. But like “general,” “core” does not clearly indicate the content or goals of the curriculum. In addition, the term is of limited use to the many institutions where this curriculum consists of broad menus of elective courses without actual core courses—although there may be a set of core goals.

“University” has the advantage of signifying that this curriculum belongs to the university as a whole and is, to some extent, common to the degrees of all students. This may be a subtlety to those less familiar with curricular structures, however. If it is not a university curriculum, they may wonder, then what is it?

“Liberal,” as in “liberal arts” or “liberal studies,” has the greatest potential for com-

municating what is intended to those familiar with academe, and the greatest potential for miscommunicating to those who are not. Those in academe are likely to recognize that the majority of general education programs are grounded in the liberal arts values of breadth and integration of knowledge and in the development of fundamental intellectual skills. But those unfamiliar with the liberal arts tradition may mistake “liberal” as a political stance. Those who interpret the liberal arts tradition to lay audiences often feel obliged to clarify this point.

Thus, none of the commonly used words meets the criteria we would expect for an effective name. Although one or another may better reflect the intent of the curriculum, they tell us little about the curriculum that helps to distinguish its structure, function, or goals from other elements of an institution’s educational plan. It may as well be named “Fred.”

At a few colleges and universities, the curriculum in question has been given a name that more precisely signifies its purpose: “Critical Foundations in the Arts & Sciences,” “The Common Learning Agenda,” “The Global Village Curriculum,” or “The International Core Program and Basic Competency Requirement.” These names have the advantage of drawing attention to distinctive features of the institutions’ educational programs. Moreover, a few colleges and universities have taken the definitive step of naming the curriculum after the institution, making it a signature element of institutional identity: “The Marshall Plan,” “The Miami Plan,” “The Kalamazoo Plan,” “The Tulsa Curriculum,” or “The Ursuline Studies Program.” These institutions have made a special commit-

ment to shared learning that is distinctive.

If the names in common use are not particularly informative and “general education” is the least among them, then why does this name persist as that most commonly used? Three possibilities come to mind. One is that, when compared to other matters, this issue does not rise to a level of importance that compels action. In the context of other concerns, the name of the common curriculum and what it signifies is not a pressing issue. A second possibility is that, even though it is important to many that the program be well named, there is inadequate consensus about what the name should be. This may reflect some variety of opinion about the priorities and goals that guide the program, and coming to consensus does take time. A third possibility is that, despite the best efforts of reformers and their ambitious curricular plans as written, the reality is that, once implemented, the general education curriculum remains mostly general. Of the three possibilities, this one has the greatest consequences for the quality of students’ educations.

Whatever the reason, dissatisfaction with both the generic title “general education” and the equally tepid alternatives to it may help to stimulate examination of what actually is being accomplished in your program, thus providing a valuable reality check. ■

References

- Harvard Committee on General Education. 1945. *General education for a free society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kimball, Bruce A. 1995. *Orators and philosophers: A history of the idea of liberal education*. New York: The College Board.
- North Central Association. 1997. *Handbook on accreditation*. Chicago: North Central Association.

Copyright of Peer Review is the property of Association of American Colleges & Universities and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.