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A brief history of general education

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ABSTRACT

In the 1960s, general education was at the forefront of innovative programs in American community colleges. Every community college designed a program of a common core of courses for the common person. General education was so popular it was included as one of the required components of a comprehensive community college along with university transfer, vocational and occupational programs, remedial education, and community service programs. By the 1980s, the common core idea began to fracture, and faculty began to add so many courses to meet general education requirements that today Thomas Bailey and his colleagues at the Community College Research Center cite the cafeteria-style, self-service model as one of the key issues keeping the Completion Agenda from reaching its goals. Whereas in the 1960s, students were required to take one comprehensive course in the humanities; students today choose from among 60 or more courses to meet the humanities requirement. In current student success reform efforts to increase retention and completion rates, the curriculum has pretty much been ignored. But leaders in a handful of community colleges are beginning to realize the unintended consequences of too many courses and too many choices, and they are beginning to appoint faculty committees to explore and redesign general education programs to better serve the needs of today's students. Few faculty leaders and administrators are familiar with the history and philosophy of general education, and this brief history will be helpful in their work as they design the next generation of these programs.

“General education has remained a noble idea but a practical backwater in most of American higher education” (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 374). This damning observation by Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer tends to relegate general education to the dustbin of history. However, there is an emerging interest in general education that may lead to a renaissance of this noble idea.

From very early times educators have attempted to define the key areas of knowledge that constitute the core of what is worth learning. The classical liberal arts of the trivium and quadrivium were first outlined in Plato's *Republic*. This was the common core of knowledge and skills on which Harvard College was established in 1636. And it provided the curricular foundation for American colleges for several hundred years, until the specialization of knowledge and the democratization of education shattered liberal education into many disciplines and many courses. The idea of a

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This brief history is an excerpt from a monograph *Bread and roses: Helping students make a good living and live a good life* to be published by the League for Innovation in the fall of 2015. To place the history in context for what is currently going on regarding a renewed interest in general education, about half the material in this manuscript is original.

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common core emerged again in the early 1900s in the form of general education, an attempt to again unify a core of knowledge for all students. Community colleges were leading advocates of general education in the 1950s and 1960s. And general education was listed along with remedial education, vocational and occupational education, university transfer, and community education as one of the five key programs of a comprehensive community college. In its heyday, general education was a noble idea and a very successful enterprise. Then, from the 1970s on, the rapid development of career and technical education called for specialization of programs and courses; and a more assertive community college faculty created specialized courses to represent their interests. “As any seasoned academic administrator will explain, much of any curriculum is a reflection of faculty stakeholder and scholarly interests and is less about well-articulated learning outcomes and competencies students will need” (LeBlanc, 2015, p. 56).

In the past several decades, the curriculum has fractured and exploded into what Thomas Bailey and his colleagues at the Community College Research Center refer to as “a cafeteria-style self-service-model” in which the colleges offer “an array of often-disconnected courses, programs, and support services that students are expected to navigate mostly on their own” (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015, p. 3). Colleges still require students to meet a 6- or 9-hour minimum in the arts and humanities or in social science, but students are allowed to choose from among as many as 40 or 50 courses to meet the requirements. In today’s community colleges, there is no longer any curriculum integrity, no cohesive and integrated curriculum, and no common core of knowledge.

And so the pendulum swings again. Leading colleges, such as Portland Community College (Oregon), Central Piedmont Community College (North Carolina), and a handful of others have appointed faculty committees to revisit general education and to reconstruct such programs to better serve the interests and needs of today’s students.

Most educators are not familiar with the history and philosophy of general education, so it is timely to provide context and perspective for those faculty members who will be creating and refurbishing the next generation of general education programs. All faculty members and administrators can benefit by reviewing this history. Graduate students will especially find this history beneficial to their studies.

General education: The early years

General education began to emerge in the first part of the 19th century as a reaction to a number of forces:

- It was, in part, a reaction to liberal education itself, which had been historically designed for aristocratic gentlemen who could afford to attend selective colleges and universities.
- It was, in part, a democratic movement to make education more accessible to nontraditional students whose numbers were rapidly increasing following World War I and II, and who began attending 2-year colleges—often referred to as Democracy’s College in the 1960s.
- It was, in part, a movement in response to the elective principle that allowed students to create their own curriculum from a smorgasbord of courses with no curriculum integrity.
- It was, in part, a change of philosophy in educational pedagogy and in experiments in what constitutes an integrated core of knowledge for all students.
- It was, in part, an attempt to guard against overspecialization in subject matter or in a profession.

Columbia University played an early role in general education by creating a special course first offered in 1919. It was titled Contemporary Civilization—and it was a required overview of knowledge and resources to help its students understand the world. Hundreds of colleges and universities have offered the course or a version of it, and many still do.

Robert Hutchins was an early innovator of the core curriculum, as president of the University of Chicago, in the 1930s. In 1931, the year Hutchins arrived at Chicago, the university launched a core curriculum known as the The New Plan. It was considered “the most thoroughgoing experiment in general education of any college in the United States” (Bell, 1966, p. 26). Hutchins was tepid in his support of this plan, and he worked with Mortimer Adler for a number of years to refine the plan more to his liking. In 1936, he appointed a Committee on the Liberal Arts “to develop a curriculum for the 4-year college that was based on the trivium and quadrivium and conveyed by the study of the Great Books” (Holyer, 2014, p. 49). In 1937, Hutchins agreed to become chairman of the board of St. John’s College where, along with his colleagues, he was allowed to create his ideal model of general education that he could not establish at Chicago. The model was created around One Hundred Great Books as the core of a 4-year degree—a program that continues today at St. John’s College. The great books program was much more liberal education than general education—an example of the confusion about the concepts then—and now.

Stevens (2001) analyzed Hutchins’ impact on general education and has pointed out one of the key dilemmas of his approach.

The course of study Hutchins offered was historically aristocratic. The notion of an education in the classics and of knowledge for its own sake was part of the 19th-century ideal of a gentlemanly education. It was an education providing refinement and culture to the upper classes rather than training them for a profession. When this kind of education is then provided to working-class students, it becomes part of a democratic philosophy. If it is provided only to a select group of upper-middle-class students, it carries residual traces of its aristocratic origins. (p. 174)

By the 1940s, a general education movement was well underway in American higher education, and Columbia University continued to play a key role. Earl McGrath at Columbia established the *Journal of General Education*, and in the first edition claimed that general education was the unifying element of a culture. “It embraces the great moral truths, the scientific generalizations, the aesthetic conceptions, and the spiritual values of the race, ignorance of which makes men incapable of understanding themselves and the world in which they live” (1946, p. 3). McGrath created one of the most quoted definitions of general education as “a common core of learning for the common man.” McGrath also pointed out that “Few terms commonly used by educators have been defined with greater variation than ‘general education’” (1944, p. 74).

Some educators argued that a different approach to education was needed for all students and hoped general education would be that vehicle. Hugh Stickler, in his seminal paper, *Whence and whither general education* (1957), made the point that general education was basically a new approach to education requiring a realignment of the curriculum and a new approach to teaching. Dean Sidney French of Rollins College (1954) had made the point cited by Stickler that “In general education courses we bend subject matter to the needs of the student; in [liberal arts] departmental courses we bend the students to the needs of the subject matter” (p. 15). The pedagogy of general education was based on tenets of Progressive Education and the related work of John Dewey. One of Dewey’s doctoral students, W. W. Charters, a professor and Director of the Bureau of Educational Research at Ohio State University (1928–1942), created a research methodology known at the time as *activity-analysis*. Charters analyzed real-life activities as a base for determining program objectives. Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri—a private 2-year innovative college for women—now a 4-year college—invited Charters to use this approach to create one of the first general education programs in the nation. Charters asked all the women students to keep detailed diaries for a week and record what they did each day, what they thought about what they did, what they thought about in general, how they interacted with those around them, etc. Applying activity-analysis to these diaries, Charters created a pattern of the major issues, ideas, and concerns of the students and designed a general education program that became a model in its time. The original program of general education at Stephens College created by W. W. Charters included orientation courses in humanities, natural science, social science, and vocation (Ankrum, 1951). Charter’s work is an

outstanding example of “bending the subject matter to the student.” Interestingly, Charter’s activity-analysis approach to creating a general education program is the same approach that career and technical educators use today to create workforce training programs.

The 1945 Harvard University Committee report *General education in a free society* was another milestone in the heyday of the general education movement. A reaction against overspecialization and an attempt to return to some of the basics of liberal education, the program proposed all undergraduates take six common courses. The recommendations were never fully implemented at Harvard, but the report influenced many general education programs across the country. There are numerous models of general education created by universities and community colleges in these productive decades worth studying in greater detail. For community colleges, B. Lamar Johnson’s 1952 book on *General education in action* is a seminal document.

Dean of instruction and librarian at Stephens College (where W. W. Charters created a model of general education), Johnson was asked in the early 1950s to study the general education programs in California community colleges. His study is probably best known for a list of 12 competencies that should be reflected in a person who is generally educated. This list, or parts of it, was duplicated verbatim in the catalogs of hundreds of community colleges across the nation as the objectives of general education throughout the 1950s and well into the 1960s.

- Exercising the privileges and responsibilities of democratic citizenship.
- Developing a set of sound moral and spiritual values by which he guides his life.
- Expressing his thoughts clearly in speaking and writing and in reading and listening with understanding.
- Using the basic mathematical and mechanical skills necessary in everyday life.
- Using methods of critical thinking for the solution of problems and for the discrimination among values.
- Understanding his cultural heritage so that he may gain a perspective of his time and place in the world.
- Understanding his interaction with his biological and physical environment so that he may adjust better to and improve that environment.
- Maintaining good mental and physical health for himself, his family, and his community.
- Developing a balanced personal and social adjustment.
- Sharing in the development of a satisfactory home and family life.
- Achieving a satisfactory vocational adjustment.
- Taking part in some form of satisfying creative activity and in appreciating the creative activities of others. (Johnson, 1952, pp. 21–22)

Except for the dated usage of gender and the absence of objectives related to information technology, diversity, and global understanding, this list is still useful as a guide in creating an integrated core of general education. Many of these objectives from the past appear in the more contemporary list of Essential Learning Outcomes created in 2007 by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007, p. 12).

Unless educators have been students enrolled in a classic general education program or have participated in creating one, it is sometimes difficult to envision the design of these programs and how they worked. A brief summary of such a program created at Santa Fe Junior College (now Santa Fe College) in Gainesville, Florida, will illustrate the integrated design and the philosophy and structures that made it work.

The integrated core at Santa Fe Junior College

Santa Fe opened its doors to students in 1966 with a general education program in place created by an engaged faculty and staff under the leadership of founding president, Joseph W. Fordyce. Six 3-

credit-hour courses, for a total of 18 credit hours, constituted an integrated program required of every entering student (see [Figure 1](#)). Descriptions of the program began with a small circle that represented the individual student. And the course that focused on the individual student was Behavioral Science 100 (BE-100)—The Individual in a Changing Environment, a personal development course designed to help students explore values, explore a philosophy of life, and confront prejudices and viewpoints. The course was taught mostly through the methods of the encounter group and the human potential seminar. It was the forerunner of the current Student Success Course. However, it was much less didactic and focused on personal elements not often addressed in college courses today. Earl McGrath called the personal development course the bellwether of the general education movement. Many colleges in the 50s through the 70s offered personal development courses or applied psychology courses, but few engaged students in the process of self-understanding as did BE-100 at Santa Fe.

Around the core course in personal development, designers drew three additional circles to illustrate the three environments that impact individual development. HM-100—The Humanities—represented the Aesthetic Environment; SC-100—The Physical Sciences—represented the Physical Environment; and SS-100—The Social Sciences—represented the Social Environment. Two lines crossed the circles indicating that in all environments students needed to be competent in two languages: EH-100—The English Language and MS-100—The Mathematics.

The diagram in [Figure 1](#) illustrates the integrative nature of the Santa Fe program.

The program was more than a core of six courses. Santa Fe had developed a philosophy of values and a philosophy of teaching to give meaning to the core. The Santa Fe Commitment included eight statements:

- (1) The student is the central focus for the process of learning.
- (2) Teaching occurs only when students learn.
- (3) Effective educational experiences will modify human behavior in a positive manner.

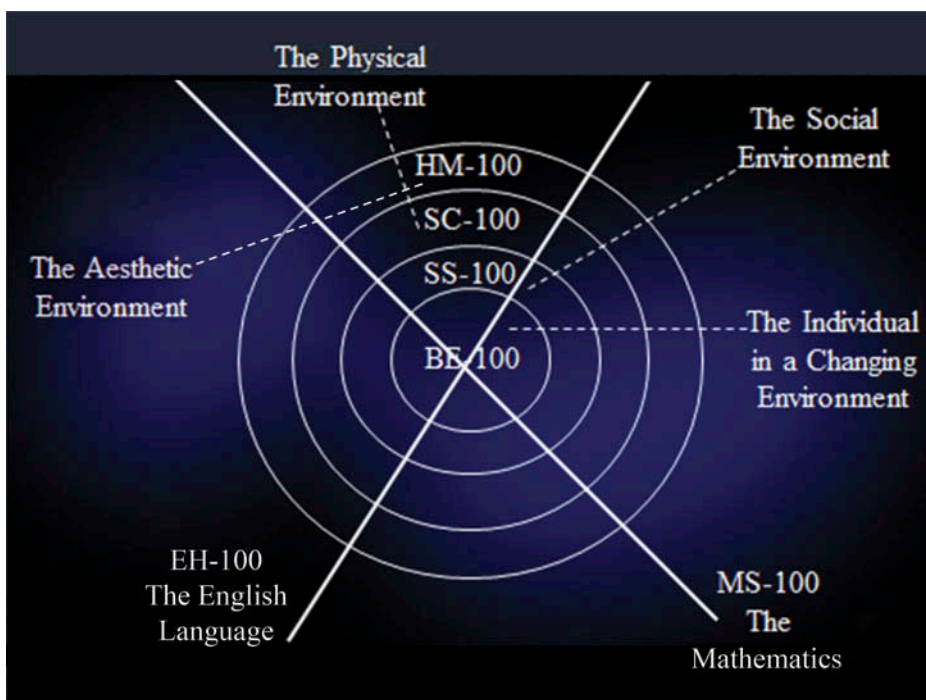


Figure 1. The integrated core at Santa Fe Junior College

- (4) All human beings are motivated to achieve that which they believe is good.
- (5) Education should be an exciting, creative, and rewarding experience for the student and the teacher.
- (6) All human beings have worth, dignity, and potential.
- (7) Experimentation and innovation are reflections of attitudes; when they are translated into practice, the process of education can be significantly advanced.
- (8) Traditional concepts of education (the lecture, the 30-student class, the 50-minute period, the standard textbook, the rectangular classroom, the student desk, etc.) are suspect and in need of careful trial and evaluation at least equal to, and perhaps more than, new and innovative practices.

The Santa Fe Commitment provided an overarching framework for the values of the college, and it was also used to screen every new employee. Every applicant for a position at Santa Fe had to write a response to the statements indicating the extent each of the eight statements reflected his or her own values. Applicants were also asked to provide evidence from their experience of how they had implemented each statement as an instructor or administrator. Robert Shepack (1969), former president of El Paso Community College in Texas, completed his doctorate at the University of Florida. He did a study on the impact of this faculty selection process and concluded that it played the significant role in helping Santa Fe become one of the most innovative colleges of its time. In 1968, Santa Fe was selected as only one of 12 colleges in the United States to membership in the League for Innovation in the Community College based in great part on its general education program and progressive philosophy. Santa Fe is still an active member of the League for Innovation and was the winner of the 2015 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the nation's preeminent recognition of high achievement and performance in America's community colleges.

In addition to this overarching philosophy for the entire college, the six core courses were required of every new student regardless of the courses transferred in. There were behavioral objectives, both cognitive and affective, for each of the courses; the grading system for all college courses used A, B, and C—students could not earn the failing grades of D and F; a critical minima of competencies was established for an A, B, or C for each course; Learning Contracts using the critical minima were required for every student in every course; and the learning strategies included an emphasis on active learning, problem-based learning, and collaborative learning.

A sound general education program involves more than agreeing on core courses or core objectives. To reflect the views of the founders of general education, there must also be a foundation of values and strategies to make the program a transformative experience for students. The leaders at Santa Fe, in addition to creating an integrated core of learning, embedded that core in a culture of innovation and a philosophy of student-centered learning that made it transformative for students and for the faculty and administration.

General education today

As noted above, general education is no longer a cohesive core of courses required of all students. It has become, instead, a smorgasbord of courses loosely connected to core disciplines from which students must make choices of two or three helpings from a buffet of sometimes a hundred or more offerings. Recent research cited by Judith Scott-Clayton (2011, pp. 24–25) in *Redesigning America's community colleges* suggested that students are dazed by too many choices of programs and too many choices of courses. Scott-Clayton contrasted the number of choices between Harvard University and nearby Bunker Hill Community College: Harvard offers limited choices for its undergraduates in that they can attend only full-time, they must complete a required core curriculum in a face-to-face setting, and they must choose one of 43 majors. In contrast, Bunker Hill offers over 70 associate degrees or certificate programs in more than 60 academic and applied fields. There is no required core curriculum; and students can choose to attend either full-time or part-time.

Students at Bunker Hill often have fewer resources and less assistance in managing complex decisions about programs and courses. Community colleges have created a recipe for failure for many of their students by the overabundance of choices.

Faculty and student-support professionals in community colleges are beginning to understand the unintended consequences of too much choice. They are beginning to explore the general education idea of a common core of courses for the common person as a way to alleviate the problem. Many colleges have already accepted the idea of a required student success course. It serves as one way of reducing choices and creating an opportunity all students can share to create connections with each other and to learn how better to navigate the college experience as a valued learning outcome every student needs. The rationale faculty accept to require a student success course for all or most students can morph into a rationale for requiring five or six core courses deemed important for all students.

There is also an emerging idea of a new kind of common core experience dubbed an Essential Education. This is defined as an integrated core of learning that includes and connects the key components from liberal education and career and workforce education to ensure that a student is equipped to earn a good living and live a good life. Students who complete this core experience should be much better equipped to pursue vocational and/or transfer goals to success and completion. By requiring this core experience for all students as the initial college experience, the stress and uncertainty of choosing majors, programs, and courses will be diminished considerably for students. The common curriculum will help unify faculty work, student support services, curriculum alignment with secondary schools and universities, and assessment processes. The cafeteria model of a buffet of courses will no longer dominate course offerings. Revision of the general education program will no longer be necessary. This is because the one-dimensional general education program of the past will be replaced by a new integration of the best from both liberal education and workforce education into a new Essential Education—an education that will help students make a good living and live a good life. (O'Banion, 2015).

There are plenty of clues to the most important elements in liberal education and workforce education that all students need. In the lists of outcomes and objectives created by advocates from each side, four stand out on most such lists: critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration and team work, and communication. These knowledge sets or skills cut across the liberal education and workforce education divide, and they begin to frame a core of integrated learning valuable to every student. These four arenas of learning could be designed fresh by educators as a required curriculum:

Critical Thinking 101
Problem Solving 101
Collaboration and Teamwork 101
Communication 101

The four areas could be taught as standalone courses for 3-semester credits each or combined into a learning community of 12 credits. Some educators will combine problem solving and critical thinking into one course; other educators will, of course, want to explore adding additional courses to the core.

In any case, there is renewed interest in general education, and it is likely we will see a number of approaches to redefining this noble idea for the 21st century. Some colleges will create new forms of the old general education core; some colleges will settle for limiting the number of choices students must make to meet an area requirement in the arts and humanities or in the social sciences. Hopefully, some colleges will experiment with creating a new curriculum based on the idea of an Essential Education that bridges the liberal education-workforce education divide. Whatever direction colleges and faculty take to redesign general education for the times in which we live, a better understanding of the history of general education will greatly benefit those who will create the designs and those for whom the designs will be created—our students.

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