



# Creating Shared Student Responsibility for General Education

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While administrative responsibility for general education most often falls within the purview of the faculty senate or to a dean of undergraduate studies, responsibility for the academic and curricular integrity of general education is more dispersed. The typical general education program does not have its own faculty community that engages in regular reflection upon a body of collective knowledge, appropriate procedures for discovery, shared curricular goals, and peer review. Instead, the general education mosaic has many tiles, each laid down by individual artisans. Faculty members take responsibility for the academic quality of their own tiles—the natural science tile, the humanities tile, the arts tile, and so on. Each of these components may be very well made, but students and faculty alike tend to perceive them as individual course requirements only, rather than to perceive the shading, outline, contour, and contrast of the mosaic as a whole.

One might hold up the disciplinary major as a better model; disciplines do engender faculty communities that engage in reflection about a body of collective knowledge, appropriate procedures of discovery, shared curricular goals, and peer review. However, instead of focusing on shared ownership of general education by faculty, which we certainly encourage, we propose here an alternative model of responsibility shared by students and their advisors. Our unit of analysis is not the content or the delivery of general education but, rather, the development of an environ-

ment in which students learn to take shared responsibility for their own learning.

## Students and General Education Reform

At best, most students consider general education an obstacle to be gotten out of the way as soon as possible on a mad dash to major courses; at worst, they consider it a devious plot on the part of colleges and universities to ensure that unpopular and irrelevant courses are filled. Thus, regardless of how compelling the imperatives driving it, general education reform—resulting in a new set of courses, new modes of instruction, new themes, or any combination of these—is unlikely to have much of an impact on students, most of whom remain unaware of the reasons for the changes.

More generally, most students do not understand the need for a general education component, which may comprise as much as one-third of their college education. This lack of awareness is compounded by the belief, reinforced by our own practices, that a college degree represents no more than the accumulation of a specified number of credits. Given that general education typically is presented to students as a subset of the total curriculum (e.g., six credits in the arts, nine credits of sciences, six credits in social sciences, and so on), is it any wonder that students approach their educations without clear, well-informed intentions?

Notwithstanding the ubiquitous talk of paradigms shifting to embrace active and engaged learning, we

continue to use the most sterile and abstract language in explaining the general education program to our students. The traditional approach is to communicate through pamphlets or booklets that have all the imagination of a computer usage manual and enough higher education jargon to challenge even the most informed among us. In some cases, colleges and universities simply provide students with a list of acceptable courses, thus reinforcing the notion that a college education is no more than an accumulation of credits.

Yet, we still believe our students will come to some profound understanding of the purposes of general education. The assumption that, by simply experiencing the designated courses, students come to appreciate the notion of general education and to understand its importance simply does not hold up in practice. In fact, this approach almost guarantees that any intended outcomes of general education reform will be lost on the recipients. Instead, students need structured opportunities to understand, plan, and implement their own general education program.

### Student Planning for General Education

We propose that students and their advisors meet regularly to discuss how best to craft the available options—and how best to see general education not only within the context of the baccalaureate degrees but also as a foundation for lifelong learning. This approach requires both the active involvement of knowledgeable advisors who are sympathetic to the goals of general

education and a structured format for student reflection on individual courses of action.

Students should be required to complete a general education plan, specifying which courses they will take and, more importantly, why. One reason, for example, might be to create a specific theme within the general education categories (such as Black Studies topics, science, technology and society interactions, or methods of communication). Drawing from the arts, social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, and mathematics/computational studies, all possible themes would fulfill some of the purposes of general education, while also allowing students to craft for themselves—and to explain to themselves and to their advisors—their own rationales for their choices.

The general education curriculum also could be used to expand upon the major. This could be accomplished not through additional major courses but, instead, through collateral courses that expose students to alternate ways of understanding a particular issue. And lastly, we should not forget that general education can be used for intellectual exploration. Students should be allowed to choose courses either simply to learn about a new area or to follow up on a purely avocational interest. Using a general education program to pursue courses for no reason other than pure love of the topic should not be abandoned as a legitimate rationale.

### Documenting Student Plans

Students should be required to engage in this planning exercise at least once a year

over the entire course of their collegiate studies—or at least until the general education component of the curriculum is satisfied. Rather than simply filing them away in an advising folder, students' ongoing planning documents could be incorporated into their electronic portfolios. This Web-based approach would ensure that students always have access to their plans and that they are free to alter them as necessary. Perhaps more importantly, it would provide students with a cumulative history of their own thought processes, reactions, and rationales.

This history of curricular choice would be a powerful addendum to an official transcript. Indeed, such an approach would fulfill the ultimate learning goals inherent in curricular choice. Whereas a transcript indicates only when a course was taken and which grade was assigned, this curricular choice document—chronicling the intellectual growth of students, in their own words—would serve as an instructional tool.

To provide the impetus for students and advisors to engage in this kind of sustained reflection, we recommend that credit be awarded for maintaining such a portfolio. Academic credit is the coin of the realm, and colleges and universities grant credits to students who engage in far less intellectual pursuits than understating the nature and purpose of general education and explaining their own particular choices. We leave it to individual campuses to decide how many credits are awarded, under whose auspices they are granted, and other administrative details.



### General Education and Citizenship

One of the central aims of general education is to help students develop the tools essential for constructive participation in civic affairs—the tools necessary for understanding the implications of how we view and respond to the social, political, professional, and artistic environments we inherit and then, altered for better or for worse, leave for others. Accordingly, in helping students learn to take shared responsibility for their learning, our model focuses on developing the kind of shared responsibility relationship a general education should engender for enlightened democratic citizenship.

It is critical to recognize that our current approaches for communicating general education to our students are not effective. Fulfilling the promise of our proposal will require the collaboration of many on campus, including faculty, administrators, academic advisers, students, and technology support personnel. Yet, there is much to be gained by creating shared student responsibility for general education, including a more profound understanding and appreciation of this significant component of a baccalaureate degree. Ultimately, however, we could gain better-informed citizens who would give the challenges facing contemporary society the same deliberate attention they gave to understanding how they educated themselves and why. ■