



The Dollars and Sense Behind General Education Reform

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Fiscal uncertainty has severely impacted curricular reform efforts as faculty and administrators endeavor to maintain the momentum of ongoing change in general education programs despite decreasing resources—not just in dollars but also in faculty goodwill. On many campuses, the general education committee aims to create a more engaging intellectual community and a more coherent undergraduate program. Individual faculty members hope to produce more committed students with strong foundational skills. Administrators work to strengthen the institution's academic identity. But when resource constraints dampen the optimism of these varied campus constituencies, the consequent clash between idealism and realism becomes a serious obstacle to curricular reform.

Initial enthusiasm for change can make everything seem both desirable and possible. To start the change process, the committee may review promising practices on other campuses such as service-learning and interdisciplinary courses. Sensitive to the need for full campus support, the committee may also consult research on institutional change to find relevant process strategies (Gaff 1980; Eckel et al. 1999). Too much attention to curricular design and approval, however, can leave a campus unprepared for the practical realities of resource constraints. At what point in the creative process should the hard questions be asked?

The collaborative intellectual processes that generate an idea-effective curriculum are not always the same as those that produce sustainable, cost-effective change. Faculty generally play the primary role in designing the

goals and structures of a new curriculum and leave it up to administrators to find the resources. But in the current fiscal context for higher education, both faculty and administrators need to be sensitive to the opportunities for, and costs of, reform. Faculty must learn to calibrate the resources required to actualize general education principles, and administrators must not let cost considerations depress the intellectual vitality of the curriculum. It takes both perspectives for institutions to optimize their limited resources—financial, physical, but most importantly, human—and improve the learning outcomes of students, whose expectations and experiences ultimately determine the quality of a general education curriculum.

Making Learning Count

Typically, general education planning sessions are highly energized as committee members debate how best to enrich the curriculum, enhance pedagogy, engage faculty, and ignite the minds of students. The committee will tend to “dream big,” calling for resource-intensive innovations such as small freshmen seminars taught only by full-time faculty. To support new emphases on diversity and global awareness, they may suggest additional faculty and resources for faculty development. If the program relies on co-curricular experiences such as community service programs or residential learning communities, they may suggest integrated staffing with student affairs. To ensure the sustainability of the revised program, the committee may recommend a director with an office, administrative assistant, and graduate students for advising and assessment. All of these “good ideas” take resources.



With student learning rather than resource management as its primary concern, the committee will understandably be reluctant to jettison promising strategies. To accomplish the goals in a cost-effective way, a fiscal perspective is necessary to generate alternative approaches. For example, integrating the freshman seminar with the standard introductory writing course could achieve a key curricular goal without additional faculty resources. Revising the major capstone course to integrate leadership and civic engagement could extend the general education objectives without adding courses.

When confronted with resource limitations, the committee must cautiously consider which ideals to sacrifice to ensure that they do not unintentionally compromise program goals. They may decide, for example, to trust voluntary involvement in faculty development or rely on department chairs for oversight and assessment. But these compromises may lead to insufficient guidance for the program, resulting in neglect over time. Indeed, “program drift” may be the primary impetus behind the call for revision. A general education curriculum in place for a long time and taught by a variety of faculty with different assumptions about the underlying principles will show signs of incoherence to both students and professors.

Any committee charged with revising general education may want to determine whether fixing what is not working by reenergizing the conversation about learning will be more resource effective than starting anew. Almost every program could

be strengthened by raising standards, making connections, and getting more synergy into the structure and content. If a campus cannot afford to create new writing-intensive courses, for example, it can be more intentional about what writing should take place in which courses, establish common evaluation rubrics, and tell students—repeatedly and throughout the curriculum—that they are accountable for writing well in all of their classes. In short, not everything needs reform and resources; sometimes realigning efforts and refreshing faculty commitment will produce the desired general education outcomes.

Reform Realism

As the committee does its work, the administration is optimistic that a rigorous and attractive general education program will strengthen admissions, assure parents and legislators of value for their investment, support student retention, and provide employers with high-caliber graduates. The president may even launch the reform effort by enthusiastically saying, “Don’t worry about resources. We will find the money.” And in some cases, tuition dollars captured from competitors or gained through increased retention could be significant enough to support the new program. A dynamic academic environment can also attract gifts and grants to support the facilities or faculty development deemed essential to the new program.

Few campuses have the courage, however, to fund general education revisions based only on the hope of future returns. Consequently, administrators know that to

align current resources with the new goals they must rely initially on reallocation. As ideas emerge from the committee, the chief academic officer may be tempted to ask, “What should we stop doing in order to fund capstone courses and undergraduate research?” But finding the resources by top-down cutting of underenrolled classes, eliminating unproductive programs, or taxing all units would quickly lead to a loss of faculty goodwill and doom the reform effort. The more effective strategy is to support the committee as it shows departments how realigning resources to address essential curricular principles throughout the four years can strengthen both general education and the major.

To soften the inevitable clash between ideals and resources, administrators can help the committee during its deliberations by encouraging faculty to identify funding needs at the same time they approve the new curriculum. For example, to guide reallocation of resources based on clear principles, a final reform proposal may set realistic standards for class size (to promote interactive pedagogy) and the percentage of courses to be taught by full-time faculty (to ensure faculty investment in the new curriculum). Administrators can also help the committee identify resources in current curricular offerings that might be invested for greater learning results by analyzing workload, program productivity, and student progression data (Ferren and Slavings 2000). All campuses are challenged to produce more learning with limited resources in an environment where general education competes with other priorities. Therefore,



in the end, courses, credits, and structures are not nearly as important as understanding how changes will benefit students.

Time Is Money

Throughout the reform process, both the committee and the administration must remain sensitive to the perspectives of the individual faculty members who will question how the new program will affect their personal allocation of time. Faculty resistance to curricular reform is often characterized as fear of change, but rational economists suggest that “opportunity cost” is the overriding issue as faculty

example, the committee could identify the faculty in sociology, political science, and elsewhere who have already refined courses that utilize service-learning to advance their own curricular priorities. Using the principle “each one, teach one,” the reform committee legitimizes existing innovations and fosters continuous improvement, thus reducing the need for radical reform and major investments.

The recent widespread interest in interdisciplinarity provides an excellent example of how alternative strategies for curricular implementation can amplify the impact of

sense of community beyond the classroom. When there are no resources to invest, the committee might locate faculty already fruitfully engaged in interdisciplinary teaching and invite them to modify the courses to fit the general education curriculum. If even that approach appears to take resources from a department, interdisciplinarity can still be activated at little cost, though in a far less robust form, by linking courses and sharing syllabi across departments.

To stimulate the kind of intellectual inventory necessary to discover where resources for reform exist, the committee and the administration need to foster active, reflective communication among faculty. Although expensive in terms of time, substantial and intellectually stimulating conversation is the least expensive stimulus for change and an essential foundation for a vital curriculum. Faculty instinctively respond to intellectual camaraderie; indeed, they complain bitterly when a deficit of intellectual exchange with faculty peers diminishes their sense of engagement with a broader academic community. Constant campus conversations about student learning can result in reformed pedagogical practices and more intentional curricula without changing requirements, lowering class sizes, or inventing new courses.

During bleak fiscal times, faculty must fight off malaise and remind themselves that they still control the quality of classroom engagement. Good teachers are constantly engaged in pedagogical self-reflection, refining assignment sequences, and rethinking the fundamental practices of their teaching. A good administrator fosters that endemic

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understandably weigh the time required to develop a new course or learn new pedagogies against their current commitments. Despite the committee’s best efforts to create “buy-in” by engaging faculty in the change process, the centrifugal forces of research, departmental demands, and family place real limits on the time faculty are able to reallocate.

Many campuses find “start up” funds for workshops, course releases, and summer institutes as incentives. Lacking such resources, some campuses try to strengthen their curriculum by finding faculty who are already pursuing the desired goals and connecting these islands of success to support the larger curricular reform effort. For

existing campus resources. To implement an interdisciplinary program effectively a campus must consider how broadly and deeply it wants the concept to reach into the curriculum. How many interdisciplinary courses should a student take? Will the courses cross institutional divisions as well as disciplines? Such questions guide a consideration of both the cost and the impact of change.

Interdisciplinary team-teaching, for example, requires an up-front investment as faculty need release time to plan courses together and initial student loads are unlikely to replace the hours lost. The investment is recouped over time, however, through such positive effects as pedagogical innovation, cross-disciplinary research, and a greater



process by encouraging and connecting faculty and thus optimizing the effect of good teaching by multiplying it across the curriculum to create a shared sense of purpose.

What Money Can't Buy

Even if a campus had all the resources it needed to create its ideal program, student resistance would still present an imposing obstacle. Students tend to view general education programs as an incoherent set of required courses of little relevance to their career interests. They readily explain that they do not work as hard in classes they don't like, and they develop resentment if they get lower grades in courses that they feel do not play to their strengths. The psychological cost of student resistance also takes a toll on faculty who feel they are dragging along students whose only goal is "to get it out of the way." The real dollar cost to the institution is apparent when students repeat a failed course or take their tuition dollars to the local community college to fulfill a dreaded requirement.

Even more alarming is the data that full-time students expect to spend little more than twenty hours a week on academics—including class and study time. The national report *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as Nation Goes to College* (AAC&U 2002) describes the multiple challenges of limited time on task, underprepared students, decreased funding, and the misalignment of high school exit requirements and college expectations. As campuses make learning-centered reforms a priority, general education programs focus not just on significant content and important

academic skills but also on how to help students develop a love of lifelong learning and the sense of social responsibility essential to participate effectively in a complex world. Reform efforts must address the gap between ideal outcomes of a general education program and the reality of the needs and behaviors of the students.

What students ask for in general education—passion, enthusiasm, and interest on the part of faculty—does not cost money. Even though students focus primarily on their job prospects and often claim internships are more important than art history, they do concede that the breadth of the general education program, when taught well, is good for them. But fostering intentional learning requires intentional pedagogy. Faculty who teach in general education must constantly renew for themselves the vital principles that animate their teaching in the context of the curriculum. Faculty must conduct with their students the same patient and painstaking discussion they have with other faculty to establish shared principles, communicate course design, and develop interdisciplinary connections with other courses rather than teach only through the lens of their own discipline. Students also need to understand their own role in constructing a compelling whole out of their education, rather than drifting through a fragmented experience. In this way, the most important resources a campus has—student time and energy—are used well.

Resolving the Tension

Too often, as a campus struggles with two co-existing issues—insufficient resources

and lack of clarity in how best to accomplish a fundamental mission—discussions of finances drown out conversations about learning. Consequently, a clear-eyed assessment of existing resources—time, energy, commitment, ideas, and budget—and a sustained discussion of common goals are necessary precursors to ensuring that the reform effort will result in an engaged community and empowered students. Administrators play an essential but delicate role in helping faculty maintain their ideals, understand fiscal realities, and test ideas against realistic resource needs. At the same time, faculty maintain their ownership of the curriculum through willing investment in the intellectual and fiscal health of the institution. In the end, curricular reform is about changing attitudes as much as it is about changing courses. Although a realistic consideration of resource limitations is a necessary context for curricular decision-making, ultimately, the highest cost in curricular reform is the opportunity an institution misses when it loses track of its ideals. ■

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