

General education in 2003

differs from its past incarnations. The choices used to be simple: core texts, core courses, or distribution requirements. Now the architecture varies as much as the institutions themselves. A plethora of elements—first-year experiences, learning communities, writing across the curriculum, senior capstones—can be combined to serve the needs of a campus's particular students. In terms of a framing philosophy, too, an institution can choose to stress competency, goals across the curriculum, or interdisciplinarity, among many other things. Successful models can be found at institutions of all types, and the process of reforming general education has energized faculty and campuses alike.

With this new flexibility, however, comes the responsibility to ensure the integrity of the student experience. The learning-centered philosophy of AAC&U's report *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* can guide effective practice. Many of the concepts proposed—valuable for designing strong general education programs—enter into the articles in this issue. Below are several of the most essential.

The primary concept is intentionality, accorded pride of place in the *Greater Expectations* report. Intentionality is an alignment of desired aims with action. The most significant aims of general education are the outcomes for student learning and the expectations of the general education program itself (its role in the entire curriculum). The actions to align include the architectural design of general education, content, teaching methods, assessments, and allocation of resources.

The second concept is coherence. As applied to the curriculum, coherence translates into conscious designs for learning, or “purposeful pathways,” that foster cumulative learning of intellectual skills and insights. Coherence implies collective faculty reflection on how courses and experiences fit together—from the student perspective—to create explicit learning plans.

The next concept, linkage, connects the various parts of the student experience: curricular (general education, the major, and professional programs) and co-curricular.

General education learning outcomes can best be achieved by drawing on all aspects of college life. Instead of simply a collection of required courses that compete with the majors, general education can become the keystone of an integrated programmatic arch of liberal learning.

The penultimate concept in this abbreviated list is a “culture of evidence.” Assessing student learning is inherent to effective teaching, and good teachers use the results to further improve student performance. Assessment of learning outcomes ultimately requires demonstrated accomplishment. With regard to general education—because transferability of learning deepens over time, through multiple uses, and in various contexts—assessment must move beyond individual course boundaries to encompass learning over the full four years.

Finally, concerted action by all stakeholders is essential to achieving greater expectations in general education. Within a single institution, general education must become the responsibility of the entire faculty. Student affairs personnel and students also form part of the equation. Across colleges and universities, especially at the state level, if achievement of learning outcomes replaces simple credit equivalence as the currency for transfer, powerful learning will result for the many students who move among educational providers.

The vision of the Greater Expectations New Academy arose from innovations at campuses around the country. The concepts inherent in this vision provide new ways to shape general education's role in student learning and advancement of mission. Because of its position at the heart of undergraduate study, general education has often functioned as a catalyst for broader institutional change. Strengthened now by the concepts of intentionality, coherence, linkage, evidence, and concerted action, it can contribute to the dramatic reorganization of undergraduate education necessary to ensure all students receive an education of lasting value for the contemporary world. ■

—Andrea Leskes, vice president for education and quality initiatives, AAC&U

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* Term borrowed from Ralph Wolff, executive director, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities.