

Leadership for General Education

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It is very encouraging to see so many individuals in so many universities in so many different Asian countries who have come together to share ideas about how to strengthen their general and liberal studies programs. I was in Hong Kong in 2009 when this conference was but a gleam in the eye of Glenn Shive. Now, three years later, it seems like a miracle that it has attracted so many like-minded people from the region.

It seems miraculous, because universities everywhere promote specialized learning. And specialized knowledge has brought enormous benefits to the modern world. Life as we know it in cities like Hong Kong would be impossible without the revolutions unimagined by our forefathers in agriculture, transportation, communication, construction, social organization, medicine, and human relations, among others that have been driven by specialized knowledge.

But many leaders have warned that specialized knowledge, without understanding its place in the larger scheme of things and without the leavening sense of the moral implications of its use is both limiting and even dangerous. In the United States we have found it important for universities to balance the study of specialization with the study of general education. As we know general education involves a broad range of knowledge, skills, attitudes, applications, and integrations—all of which help students to acquire a more holistic education than they can by means of specialization alone.

But in a university that is organized by academic disciplines, each a significant if limited perspective on the world, it is difficult to gain a legitimate place for general education. It requires strong, smart, and sustained leadership to assure that students learn a specialization embedded within a larger framework.

At the outset, let's be clear about who it is that exerts leadership. I once chaired a session in a conference that featured Harlan Cleveland, a former university dean and government official who told the audience, "Leadership is what happens at your level and above." He meant that everyone at a university can exercise leadership for

general education—presidents and top administrators, of course, but also professors, student affairs staff, and yes, even students. Making sure that a university provides a broad general education for all students, regardless of their course of study, is everyone’s business.

Because a university is a complex and dynamic social system, attending to the health of general education is a large and difficult matter. It involves far more than a small slice of the curriculum and a few professors teaching a few courses to their students—although that is the heart of the enterprise. In an effective general education program many additional steps must be taken. Academic leaders need to assure that the following actions occur.

- Large numbers of faculty members are recruited to teach and revise general education courses, and this must be a continuous process because there will be turnover. These new faculty members must learn what general education is and how their courses are distinctive in serving general education purposes, and they need to become committed to this unfamiliar form of education.
- In effective general education teaching staff learn to work collaboratively to implement a “program” of general education; in the words of my AAC&U colleague Eugene Rice, they move from a vision of “my work” to one of “our work.”
- Instructors, in large part, change their pedagogy “from teaching to learning,” in which students and their whole development occupy center stage.
- Students learn to abandon their comfortable rote learning and regurgitating the “correct” answers on examinations. Like their professors, they will learn to venture outside their “comfort zones.”
- Students will come to understand the nature of general education, why it is an essential part of their education, and will not have to ask “Why do I have to take this course.”
- Institutions will invest in continuing faculty development programs, so that professors can learn from early experience, discuss both pros and cons of what has happened individually and collectively, and make mid-course corrections in their courses and programs.
- General education and the majors will become integrated, because as the late Ernest Boyer noted, “Rather than divide the undergraduate experience into separate camps—general versus specialized—the curriculum at a college of quality will bring the two together.’ Specialists recognize the value of general education and build on that learning by promoting connected learning, higher

order intellectual skills, and perspectives like globalization, diversity, and moral reasoning in their specialized courses.

- Student affairs staff will develop a range of extracurricular activities that encourage student learning in ways that supplement and complement classroom learning.
- Presidents, provosts, deans, and department chairs embrace general education, speak knowledgeably and favorably about its value, and allocate financial and human resources to general education. They will not take the resources gained from involvement in general education and use them to enhance research or the majors at the expense of general education.
- Institutions will provide rewards for faculty who are effective teachers in general education, hopefully by embracing what the Boyer and Rice call “a broader definition of scholarship.” This recognizes that faculty members actually do more scholarship than publishing in their disciplinary journals. They also apply their knowledge in service to the community, integrate ideas across academic disciplines, and engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning. In this scenario, faculty will be rewarded for the rich variety of research they do related to general education.
- Universities will establish effective programs of student advisement to help students make choices that are right for them.
- Universities will assure that their public spokespersons are able to educate the public about the “practical value of general/liberal education.” It will be especially important to explain to parents why a broad education is important for their sons and daughters and how it will help them succeed in their professions.
- Universities will establish programs to assess the extent to which students achieve the expected learning outcomes, provide feedback to the professors and staff, and expect them to use the results to continuously improve the programs.
- The government and the citizenry will continue to provide the necessary financial support for the new programs as the new initiatives send their tender new roots deeper into the academic soil and become institutionalized.
- Employers will be pleased with university graduates who are more broadly educated, can think more creatively and solve unscripted problems, have a strong sense of their native identity, are more prepared to cope with the demands of globalization, and are more effective world citizens.

Frankly, developing and sustaining a vibrant general education is not as simple or easy as it might seem. Indeed, Frederick Rudolph’s classic study of the history of the curriculum in the United States offers a cautionary tale.

“Concentration was the bread and butter of the vast majority of professors, the style they knew and approved, the measure of departmental strength and popularity. Breadth, distribution, and general education were the hobby horses of new presidents, ambitious deans, and well-meaning humanists who were elected to curriculum committees as a gesture of token support for the idea of liberal learning. When that gesture collided with the interests of the department and the major field, only rarely did the general prevail over the special.”

It would be foolish to disregard the implications of this warning.

But if you believe, as I do, that contemporary students should learn both a specialization and a broad general education, then there is much work yet to be done at each of our universities. Indeed, all of the items listed above constitute an “action plan” for the future that might be widely applicable.. After all, general education is far more than a curriculum for students. It is a total university commitment, because everything that happens on a university campus has implications for the education of students. If we want the kinds of generally educated students that those of us in this conference envision, then there is much work ahead. There is a continuing need for leadership at your level and above.