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Transforming Gen Ed

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Blog: [Higher Ed Gamma](#) ^[1]

When I look at the curricula at various colleges and universities, and compare it to the requirements-free education that I encountered at Oberlin in the early 1970s, I am struck by how detailed and prescriptive general education has become.

To take one example: at the University of California, Santa Cruz, the list of general education requirements currently includes the following 15 categories:

- Cross-Cultural Analysis
- Ethnicity and Race
- Interpreting Arts and Media
- Mathematical and Formal Reasoning
- Scientific Inquiry
- Statistical Reasoning
- Textual Analysis and Interpretation
- Environmental Awareness
- Human Behavior
- Technology and Society
- Collaborative Endeavor
- Creative Process

- Service Learning
- Composition
- Disciplinary Communication

It would certainly be possible to nitpick, check for omissions and call for an even longer list. After all, there are no required courses in history, a foreign language or government. Nor are students mandated to take courses that ensure that they encounter masterworks of art, literature, music, philosophy or moral and political theory. Nothing guarantees that students will attend a concert, a dance performance, a play or an opera, or visit a museum.

Also missing are requirements that students are exposed to various forms of pedagogy: collaborative learning, experiential learning, field-based learning, immersive learning, inquiry-based learning, integrative learning, multidisciplinary learning, project- or problem-based learning, research-based learning or learning through making or doing.

Nor is familiarity with modes of interpretation and methodology explicitly required, such as those grounded in particular disciplines or in the latest currents of cultural studies, such as critical race theory, feminism, Marxism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism or semiotics.

Then, too, there are no explicit requirements that students take a seminar, a lab, a practicum, a proseminar, a tutorial or a performance class, or that they develop socio-emotional skills (including relationship skills, social awareness, empathy or responsible decision making) or learn about the job market and career possibilities or acquire marketable skills.

I mention all this not to pick on a particular university, or to call for a lengthier and more comprehensive list of requirements, but, rather, to prompt reflection on the nature of gen ed today. We might ask:

- Do these institutional requirements reflect a coherent philosophy of education or a consensus about educational goals -- or are the requirements best understood as the product of political compromise?
- Are the requirements reasonably easy to navigate -- or do they make it difficult for students to graduate in a timely manner, especially those who transfer from community colleges?
- Are the gen ed requirements generic -- or do they speak to a particular institution's identity and distinctive mission?
- Does the gen ed curriculum actually ensure that students acquire the breadth of knowledge, the command of skills or the habits of mind that we expect of a college graduate -- or does it consist merely of box checking?

I know firsthand how hard it is to achieve a consensus about institutional requirements, and given the number of stakeholders and interest groups involved, it's amazing that the faculty reach any agreement at all.

Over the past few years, many institutions have reconsidered their gen ed requirements. Sometimes, this reconsideration is driven by the reaccreditation process. At other times, it is a branding exercise, as a private institution seeks to make a name for itself in today's highly competitive higher ed environment.

In still other instances, it involves repackaging and relabeling an existing curriculum, to give the requirements a contemporary sheen. In still others, curricular redesign serves as an excuse for reducing the number of required courses in foreign languages, the natural sciences and mathematics.

But in many instances, a review of the gen ed portion of the curriculum is a serious endeavor, motivated by a desire to give the lower-division experience more coherence, thematic unity and relevance, and to provide a clearer rationale for the courses students must take.

Certain themes run through gen ed redesign:

- **A multiyear focus**

Instead of concentrating general education during the first two years, the requirements are infused across the entire undergraduate experience. Students are often required to fulfill a writing-within-the-discipline requirement and to complete a capstone course or senior project.

- **Inclusion of outside-the-classroom activities**

These range from required attendance at lectures and performances to more ambitious requirements that may include experiential learning, an internship or international or intercultural exposure.

- **Applied learning**

This may include a service learning or civic engagement activity, a global or cross-cultural learning activity, a collaborative problem-solving project, or a creative activity.

In redesigning their gen ed curriculum, colleges and universities have generally settled on one of a number of popular strategies.

- **A competencies or literacies focus**

Instead of focusing on specific bodies of content, the curriculum is redesigned around skills, modes of inquiry and 21st-century literacies: critical thinking, financial literacy, information literacy, second language proficiency, scientific and technological literacy, media literacy, data fluency, citizenship and empowerment, wellness, and communication across borders [2].

- **A career preparation focus**

By requiring courses on work and the workplace, a field experience, an internship, and a project that demonstrates the student's creativity, problem-solving acumen and ability to apply skills, the institution seeks to produce job-ready graduates.

- **A thematic approach**

One way to make gen ed curriculum more coherent and synergistic is to organize the classes around common themes. This approach, adopted by Northern Illinois University, features such themes as health and wellness, social justice and diversity, and sustainability.

- **A relevance approach**

One way to engage students is to require courses that tackle a grand challenge, a big question or an enduring or contemporary issue from the perspective of multiple disciplines. By addressing real-world problems through an interdisciplinary lens, institutions hope to help students understand the multidimensional nature of problem solving.

Let me suggest several alternate approaches that might help meet the needs of today's extraordinarily diverse students who have their own goals and interests.

1. A Pathways Approach

We might consider a decentralized approach, in which faculty create structured pathways into certain high-demand fields of study organized around the theme of professional identity construction. This approach requires faculty across disciplines to work together to design a more coherent, synergistic curriculum for students who wish to become accountants or engineers or physicians or social workers or teachers, with each course contributing to the production of a well-rounded professional.

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley experimented with a biomedical sciences pathway that included courses in the history of medicine, the literature of pain and illness, medical ethics, representations of the body, and other humanities and social sciences courses that sought to nurture health professionals who are well versed in the full range of knowledge and skills we expect of a doctor or nurse.

Without a doubt, these pathways need to be reviewed by a college or university committee to ensure that they meet the institution's broader learning objectives (and students would, no doubt, need to be given an opt-out option). But the result might be a more cohesive, intentionally designed road map to a degree and a postgraduation career.

2. A Faculty-Driven Approach

If institutions find it difficult or impossible to create a robust gen ed curriculum, why not let interdisciplinary groups of faculty devise their own gen ed tracks? Harvard's Humanities 10 and 11 and its Social Studies 10 courses, Yale's Directed Studies program, and Purdue's Cornerstone certificate program model such an approach.

This approach, where faculty create their own ideal lower-division curriculum, has proven to be quite successful, attracting a lot of undergraduate interest. Typically, these initiatives offer sweeping introductions to classic texts and frameworks of analysis courses that give motivated students a rigorous way to meet key requirements that goes far beyond disciplinary-based introductory courses.

3. An Institution-Specific Approach

A handful of liberal arts colleges, like Hiram College, with its [Urgent Challenges Curriculum](#) ^[3], now offer general education pathways that underscore and reinforce the school's distinctive institutional identity. Arthur Levine's [Bradford Plan for a Practical Liberal Arts Education](#) ^[4] pioneered this approach. It combined the application of liberal arts skills through internships, applied minors, study of work and workplaces, senior projects, and "outside-the-classroom" co-curricular activities. Although Bradford College [ultimately succumbed to debt and declining enrollment](#) ^[5], it demonstrated the possibility of designing a curriculum around a collective vision.

4. A Student-Driven Approach

Another option is to [let individual students design their own lower-division educational pathways](#) ^[6], an approach instituted, with some variation, at Amherst, Bennington, Brown, Hampshire, Sarah Lawrence, Smith and Wesleyan. Viewed by its proponents as a way to affirm students' freedom, creativity and individuality and produce agile, independent thinkers, this approach is often regarded skeptically by those who doubt that students receive the kind of active advising and faculty engagement that they need if they are to achieve curricular breadth and tackle difficult and unfamiliar courses outside their comfort zone.

5. A Certificate- or Badge-Based Approach

An alternative to explicit requirements is to offer students opportunities to acquire special skills that can be denoted on their transcript. These might involve certificates in data analysis, design, project management, research methods, sustainability or even career preparedness (which might involve workshops in etiquette, job search techniques, leadership, presentation skills and résumé writing).

My own preference is to let a thousand flowers bloom. Interesting ideas abound.

Much as the economy has embraced customization and individuation, might it not make sense to give students options within a broad set of expectations? I find it ironic that a generation of faculty who began their studies during the 1970s and 1980s, when many requirements were eliminated, is now exiting institutions that have imposed requirements not radically dissimilar than those they rebelled against.

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[2] <http://mediashift.org/2018/01/radically-rethink-gen-ed-requirements/>

[3] <https://catalog.hiram.edu/undergraduate/academic-program-core-curriculum/>

[4] https://www.jstor.org/stable/27797189?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

[5] <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/he.452>

[6] http://www.teaglefoundation.org/Teagle/media/GlobalMediaLibrary/documents/resources/Values_of_the_Open_Curriculum.pdf?ext=.pdf

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