



What Is a Generally Educated Person?

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The late Joseph Katz defined general education as “the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that all of us use and live by during most of our lives—whether as parents, citizens, lovers, travelers, participants in the arts, leaders, volunteers, or Good Samaritans” (AAC 1988, 3). This definition invites individuals into a discussion about which knowledge, skills, and attitudes are most important for students to acquire and about which curricular and instructional practices are most likely to cultivate them.

It is important for campuses periodically to hold such conversations because the reasoning behind decisions previously arrived at tends to fade with the passage of time, eroding the social compact that explicitly defines the expectations for student learning and provides a rationale for the curriculum. Then faculty members tend to focus narrowly on their own courses and the interests of their departments and to forget the larger educational agenda facing their students. In such situations, faculty often advise students to “get their general education requirements out of the way” or teach their own courses in ways that neglect the broader purposes that nurture the qualities that characterize an educated person.

Another reason for initiating periodic conversations about the aims of education and the best curricular configurations for achieving them is that large numbers of today’s faculty have not been involved in such conversations. In August, I visited three universities launching campus-wide conversations about general education curricula. One had hired more than half of its faculty in the last five years, and the other

two had large minorities of new faculty. The new faculty often did not understand the rationale behind certain requirements and lacked commitment to a curriculum that they inherited rather than invented. Most junior faculty welcomed conversations that invited them to participate in making decisions about the best curriculum for their students.

When an institution’s faculty and other constituencies are asked what is most important for their students to learn, they typically put the liberal arts and sciences—their content, methods, and perspectives—at the top of the list. For example, they commonly decide to emphasize knowledge of history and culture and of science and mathematics; skills such as logical and critical thinking and communication; and knowledge about diversity, intercultural skills, and engagement in the local community. Indeed, there appears to be a convergence about what used to be called the “marks of an educated person” across a wide variety of groups. Leaders of the professional accreditation bodies for business, education, engineering, and nursing have declared the qualities of liberal education to be central to the successful practice of all those professions. They and their colleagues in regional accrediting and in several educational associations have agreed that students should acquire the following attributes: breadth of knowledge and capacity for lifelong learning; abilities to analyze, communicate, and integrate ideas; and effectiveness in dealing with values, relating to diverse individuals, and developing as individuals (AAC&U 2004a).



The General Education We Need Today

Why are liberal and general educational outcomes valued so highly today? In part, it is because the United States has moved from an agrarian economy, through an industrial economy, to a knowledge-based economy. Labor economists have determined that, for a knowledge-based economy where many people work on solving unscripted problems, a liberal education is excellent preparation for the best careers (Carnevale and Strohl 2001). These views reverse the old saw, derived from the time of the industrial economy, that liberal and general education are impractical, irrelevant, or unnecessary and that only the major or professional preparation is of value. Indeed, a contemporary liberal or general education may be the most useful career preparation for the knowledge-based economy.

In addition, this nation is far more diverse than it ever has been, and it is engaged in global affairs in regard to such matters as defense, the environment, health, and justice. Educated people need to be able to understand the similarities and differences among people and to develop the capacities to bring different people together to solve problems, whether in the workplace, one's community, or internationally.

How to Secure Agreement about Aims?

How can campus-wide agreement about the most important goals of a college education be secured? When faculty are

invited into a conversation about the curriculum, they tend to emphasize the issues important to themselves, such as disciplinary turf, workload, and resources.

Understandably, they want to protect their own courses and departments, are wary of any extra work that a curricular revision might entail, and suspect that there may not be enough resources to support change. Although these are important issues, they ought not to drive the conversation. In fact, if turf issues predominate, curriculum discussions become little more than a political tug of war dominated by the strongest factions. I typically advise campus leaders to set aside these issues and to take up staffing, faculty workload, and resources later, when specific curricular proposals are considered.

Instead, the conversation should be driven by learning goals for students and the educational principles that are shared among the faculty. My experience is that curriculum committees or task forces tend to rush too quickly into the design of a new curriculum. It is important to take enough time to discover what is common among the faculty and to secure basic agreement about what they think students should

learn and about what qualities should characterize a high-quality, coherent college education. If a faculty has done a lot of such talking and has worked across departments and schools on innovations in teaching, learning, and the curriculum, then agreement about these fundamentals may come fairly quickly. On the other





hand, if a faculty has done little talking or experimenting, it will take faculty members longer to get to know one another, to determine what they have in common, and to agree upon a curricular framework for their students.

How can one engage the faculty and keep them focused on deciding what a high-quality education for students should consist of? One way—usually a

heard remark that “if it isn’t broke, don’t fix it”

- Data from student evaluation of courses, surveys of student experiences, exit interviews of students withdrawing, and evidence about student retention, for example, which can provide useful information that is not widely known
- Studies of national curriculum trends and of what other institutions are doing

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prescription for disaster—is for the members of a curriculum leadership group to confine the conversation among themselves, develop the best proposal they can devise, distribute it to their faculty colleagues, and then hold a public hearing. Without prior conversations, awareness that there are problems with the current curriculum, and agreements about what students should learn, faculty are sure to attack any proposed change, no matter how well thought out or cogently expressed.

A better approach is to lead the faculty into a collective inquiry involving several dimensions:

- An analysis of problems with the current curriculum to preempt the sure-to-be-

- Analyses of the professional literature containing issues and concerns that may resonate on the campus
- Comments of community advisory bodies or employers about what they look for in hiring new employees and the perceived strengths and weaknesses of their graduates

Such new information is part and parcel of the kind of intellectual inquiry already familiar to faculty members.

One other tendency of curriculum task forces is to hold discussions with departments and schools. Although these groupings surely must be heard, meetings in their departments tend to elicit protection of disciplinary or departmental turf. At least at an early stage, it is better to organize small

interdisciplinary groups to discuss what students should learn and to share educational ideas among individuals who may not have discussed these matters. This can elicit more creative responses, as individuals play off the ideas of their colleagues. These small groups are more conducive to open, inclusive, and constructive dialogue than are department meetings where a few voices tend to dominate.

One particularly interesting way to stimulate dialogue is by changing the terms and getting outside the usual discussions. For example, one technique I have used is to ask faculties to complete a brief questionnaire and then discuss their various responses. In an exercise I call “The Fives,” faculty are asked to list the five ideas and skills they want students to learn, the five persons (living or dead) they would want their students to know, the five places they would like their students to visit, the five musical or artistic performances their students should see, the five books students should read, etc. Individuals can then discuss their answers and the reasoning behind them. In another questionnaire, *Assessing General Education* (Meacham 1994), individuals are asked to rate their general education program on twenty-eight different dimensions identified as important in various AAC&U publications, such as the clarity of student learning goals, coherence of the curriculum, and evidence of effectiveness. Then responses can be compared, and discussions can focus on items where there is much disagreement or on those dimensions with high or low scores.

Two Remaining Challenges

After more than two decades of serious attention to assessing the outcomes of a college education, few colleges and universities can answer legitimate questions about how much their students are learning. While there are good tests for measuring effectiveness in business, law, and other professions, the outcomes of general education remain elusive and relatively unstudied. In a recent statement from its board of directors, AAC&U (2004b) urges institutions to focus on five widely valued sets of educational outcomes and to concentrate on assessing them. The outcomes are (1) analytical, communication, quantitative, and information processing skills; (2) understanding inquiry practices of the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts; (3) intercultural knowledge and collaborative problem-solving skills; (4) proactive sense of responsibility for individual, civic, and social choices; and (5) habits of minds that foster integrative thinking and the ability to transfer knowledge and skills from one setting to another. (An abridgement of this statement is published in this issue on pages 26-29.)

Another challenge is to entice individual departments to incorporate attention to general education goals into their major programs. In traditional practice, general education has been separated from study in the major, and preprofessional education has stood apart from other college programs. Yet, as noted in AAC&U's report *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (2002, 31), "the goals of liberal education

are so challenging that all the years of college and the entire curriculum are needed to accomplish them. Responsibility for a coherent curriculum rests on the shoulders of all faculty members working cooperatively." Indeed, the recommendation that college curricula integrate general education and study in the major, including pre-professional programs, lies at the very heart of the *Greater Expectations* vision.

Complex liberal learning outcomes ought to be developed across the curriculum, creating a coherent educational experience. Through their course requirements for the major, departments can do an excellent job of addressing skills such as critical and analytic thinking, communication, and the use of technology. They also can incorporate attention to ethics and help students attend to diversity in their courses of study. At institutions that value these kinds of learning, it is a mistake to neglect the power of majors to embrace and cultivate them. As the late Ernest Boyer reminded us (1988), "rather than divide the undergraduate experience into separate camps, general versus specialized education, the curriculum of a college of quality will bring the two together."

Shared Responsibility

In the words of the seminal publication *Integrity in the College Curriculum* (AAC 1985, 9), the task is "to revive the responsibility of the faculty as a whole for the curriculum as a whole." It is the corporate quality of the general education program that makes it so difficult to secure agreement among the faculty about the

aims and principles of education. It would be easy for each individual to describe his or her concept of an educated person, but the reality is that it is a community that must reach agreement. This is the first and necessary step in renewing a general education program, one that intentionally cultivates the essential qualities of an educated person. ■

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