

General education, assessment, and improving student learning

University of Oregon

November 30, 2016

Some background on general education

Much has lately been written on general education... Why has this concern become so strong in late years? Among many reasons three stand out: the staggering expansion of knowledge produced largely by specialism and certainly conducing to it; the concurrent and hardly less staggering growth of our educational system with its maze of stages, functions, and kinds of institutions; and not least, the ever-growing complexity of society itself.

The question has therefore become more and more insistent: what then is the right relationship between specialistic training on the one hand, aiming at any one of a thousand different destinies, and education in a common heritage and toward a common citizenship on the other?

The term, general education, is ... is used to indicate that part of a student's whole education which looks first of all to his life as a responsible human being and citizen; while the term, special education, indicates that part which looks to the student's competence in some occupation.

General education should promote “...one who possess an inner integration, poise, and firmness, which in the long run come from an adequate philosophy of life”

Finally, the problem of general education is one of combining fixity of aim with diversity in application... What is wanted, then, is a general education capable at once of taking on many different forms and yet of representing in all its forms the common knowledge and the common values on which a free society depends..

The implicit model behind most distribution programs is that breadth is good; it is an end, not a means to some other quality of mind

Blue sky

- Imagine you were starting with a blank slate
 - What would you want general education to accomplish?
 - How would you structure general education?

From our research and work with institutions

General education

- Regardless of the fancy names institutions adopt (i.e., ways of knowing, areas of inquiry, interdisciplinary, arcs, linked courses, constellations, etc.), most general education programs are distribution systems where students take an array of courses offered at an array of points in their careers
- Distribution systems are not designed with learning in mind
- They are built on the assumption that transformational learning will result from a couple of courses, taught by multiple instructors, taken at different times in a student's career
- Even when institutions have “core” or “common” courses with common learning outcomes, sections of these courses often differ dramatically depending on who is teaching them

General education

- Despite rhetoric to the contrary, most general education systems are still based on the idea of exposure rather than learning
- Most faculty believe that learning is delivered primarily by the structure of the general education curriculum and the content of the courses rather than the quality of teaching in general education courses and programs
- But most general education curricula do not have the common elements, course availability, nor sequencing necessary to produce consistent learning outcomes

Wabash Study findings on Good Practices

- **Good Teaching and High-Quality Interactions with Faculty and Staff**
 - Faculty/staff interest in teaching and student development
 - Out-of-class student/staff & student/faculty interactions
 - Organization, preparation, clarity, prompt feedback
- **Academic Challenge and High Expectations**
 - Hard work, challenging assignments and interactions
 - Synthesis, judgment, integration, and reflection
- **Interactional Diversity**
 - Meaningful interactions

	<i>Good Teaching</i>	<i>Academic Challenge</i>	<i>Interactional Diversity</i>
Critical thinking	✓		
Political & social involvement		✓	✓
Socially responsible leadership	✓	✓	
Academic motivation	✓	✓	—
Well-being	✓	✓	
Interest in reading & writing	✓	✓	✓
Openness to diverse ideas & people	✓	✓	✓
Moral reasoning	✓	✓	✓
Need for cognition	✓	✓	✓
Orientation to diversity	✓	✓	✓

Much of the impact of good pedagogy is mediated by the fact that it shows students that teachers are invested in their growth and development

Good professors...

- “Enjoy teaching itself”
- “Care about me on a personal level”
- “Follow my progress”
- Are both supportive and demanding
- “Are passionate”
- “Go above the minimum they need to do”
- “Take a dry topic and make it personal and interesting”
- “Are engaged with students”

Initial observations

- Decentralization
 - True everywhere, but more so here
 - Students notice it, and this is unusual
 - *“After I came here, I realized we’re not the University of Oregon, we’re all these different colleges, departments, disciplines. It’s like lots of little departments in a bigger department.”*
 - *All the different units cause “a breakdown in communication and clarification”*
 - *“There are lots of different systems within the university. It’s hard to navigate through them, and hard to even know what’s out there.”*
 - *“It’s disorienting”*
 - *“Lots of hoops, and different hoops, to do things in different areas”*
 - *“It’s like a thousand voices yelling at you”*

Initial observations

- For some of the students with whom we spoke, their solution to the chaos was to find and stay within a smaller community

Initial observations

- Students form their rationale for why general education is or is not important
 - Sometimes this was good
 - *“I added a minor because of this class”*
 - *“It changed the way I saw my major”*
 - *“Made me the person I am today”*
 - *“The point of general education is to help you learn to think”*
 - Sometimes it was hoop jumping
 - *“What’s the point in taking a course when I won’t remember anything and I won’t use it?”*

Initial observations

- The impact of general education courses was based almost entirely on how well the course was taught
 - *“Teachers can make or break it”*
 - *“Good teachers can make you learn and understand the value of a class”*
 - *“It’s important not to overlook who is teaching the course. If the instructor is poor, you might start the course loving the subject, but wind up hating it.”*

Initial observations

- The programs we heard about appeared to be well run
 - Sounds like pockets of high-quality work all across the institution
- More discussion about, and work on, good teaching than we hear at most research universities
 - Teaching Engagement Program (TEP) and the Scientific Literacy Program (SLP) appear to be doing outstanding work
 - *Remarkable examples of faculty development programs*
 - *Evidence based, but tuned to local context*
 - *It is interesting to hear, on the one hand, faculty talk about their work, and on the other, students commend their experiences in those classes*

Initial observations

- Department-level assessment is in its infancy, but U of O is building it the right and most effective way
 - But faculty, especially those in the Arts and Sciences, will need help learning how to do this so that it provides useful information
 - We heard confusion about
 - *Whether assessment means “judging student work” versus “using student work to judge ourselves”*
 - *Does assessment have to be quantitative?*
 - *Is it for accreditation or for improvement?*
 - These kinds of issues are typical
- **It’s not yet clear how**
 - Assessment connects with faculty development initiatives
 - People from across departments and divisions will learn from one another’s work
 - Survey and other institutional data inform faculty conversations

Initial observations

- Possible next steps for thinking about general education
 - Conversations with students
 - Review survey and institutional data
 - Conversations with faculty development leaders about what they've learned about supporting effective faculty development at U of O
- Long-term advice
 - If you do revise general education, build assessment in at the start, not as an add on
 - If you can't think about how to readily assess any potential program, the program won't be an improvement over the current program