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Creating Shared Responsibility for General Education and Assessment



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The peer review process has long been the academy's means of ensuring high quality in research, teaching, programs, accreditation, and other key areas. With this quarterly, AAC&U not only invokes this standard of quality but also embraces a more inclusive definition of the academic community. Every quarter, Peer Review brings together a broad range of contributors and readers—including anyone who wishes to participate in improving the quality of undergraduate education.

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Cover Illustration by Dave Cutler for peerReview.

This issue of *Peer Review* was planned in concert with AAC&U's upcoming Network for Academic Renewal meeting "General Education and Assessment: Creating Shared Responsibility for Learning Across the Curriculum," which will be held in February. The tracks for that meeting are organized around a particular set of questions about the aims of general education; the assessment of student gains in learning; signature programs; engagement and leadership; and shared ownership and responsibility. The articles in this issue also explore these questions, and we hope the issue will serve as a useful complement.

The larger theme of creating shared responsibility across the curriculum is rooted not just in the upcoming meeting or a single issue of *Peer Review*, however. It is also key to several recommendations in AAC&U's 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*. That report describes liberal education outcomes that are important for all college students, regardless of their area of specialization. The importance of these outcomes—and of the larger vision of a New Academy founded upon their achievement—derives, in part, from their practicality; they reflect the multiple kinds of learning graduates actually will use in discharging their responsibilities as citizens of a diverse and globally-interconnected democracy; as active participants in a dynamic, knowledge-based economy; as lifelong learners seeking after personal fulfillment. The report makes clear that achieving these outcomes for all students will depend on multiple stakeholders taking shared responsibility for this new vision for learning.

While this will not be easy, the good news is that there is widespread consensus about the importance of these learning goals. *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree*, a recent report from the Greater Expectations Project on Accreditation and Assessment, documents this emerging consensus among accreditors and other higher education leaders about the liberal learning outcomes essential for all college students. Moreover, through the Presidents' Campaign for the Advancement of Liberal Learning (CALL), sponsored by AAC&U, more than 525 college and university presidents have exhorted their "colleagues around the country to ensure that every college student experiences the full benefits of a twenty-first century liberal education." In endorsing the *Greater Expectations* vision, the Presidents' CALL provides further evidence of consensus about the kind of learning all students need now: "The approach to higher learning that best serves individuals, our globally engaged democracy, and an innovating economy is liberal education. Liberal education comes in many shapes and forms in the contemporary academy, but in every one of those forms, its aims include: developing intellectual and ethical judg-

ment; expanding cultural, societal and scientific horizons; cultivating democratic and global knowledge and engagement; and preparation for work in a dynamic and rapidly evolving economy."

The *Greater Expectations* report heralds the advent of a New Academy animated by this remarkable unity of purpose. In itself, however, the academy's corporate commitment to providing all students with such a practical liberal education—while of doubtless significance—would not ensure success. This commitment must be articulated through the diversity of institutional types and missions characteristic of American higher education.

In striving to meet these greater expectations, individual institutions confront several challenges. Because complex liberal learning outcomes must be developed across the curriculum, creating curricular coherence is chief among these challenges. Hence, a key recommendation made in the *Greater Expectations* report: college curricula ought to integrate general education and study in the major, including preprofessional programs. Campus leaders must work to create a shared sense of responsibility for achieving student learning goals, and they must distribute responsibility for assessing that achievement.

They must, for example, work to consolidate the gains already made through a range of successful innovations—from learning communities to capstone experiences, from freshman seminars to service-learning projects. This involves working to ensure a coherent educational experience for all students through purposeful integration. In short, institutions must not allow successful innovations to languish at the margins of the academy, thus effectively restricting access to the powerful forms of learning achieved through these innovative practices.

AAC&U works with colleges and universities across the country as they undertake reform efforts to enact the vision of the New Academy in institution-specific ways, in ways that simultaneously respect the diversity of mission and build on the cross-institutional commitment to the broad goals of liberal education. Because it is focused on outcomes rather than on disciplines, and because it draws from the perspectives of a range of stakeholders, the *Greater Expectations* framework is an especially useful resource for campuses at various stages of reform. It is our hope that this issue of *Peer Review* will be used similarly to enable and advance discussions about the aims, purposes, and best practices of a twenty-first century liberal education. —**DAVID TRITELLI**

ONLINE FORUM

Join us online to expand the discussion. Respond to articles in this issue of *Peer Review*, share your thoughts, and read what your colleagues are saying about this topic.

www.aacu.org/peerreview



What Is a Generally Educated Person?

By **Jerry G. Gaff**, senior scholar, Association of American Colleges and Universities

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

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.

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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Creating Shared Student Responsibility for General Education

By Eric R. White, executive director of the division of undergraduate studies, and **Jeremy Cohen**, associate vice provost for undergraduate education and professor of communications, both at The Pennsylvania State University

While administrative responsibility for general education most often falls within the purview of the faculty senate or to a dean of undergraduate studies, responsibility for the academic and curricular integrity of general education is more dispersed. The typical general education program does not have its own faculty community that engages in regular reflection upon a body of collective knowledge, appropriate procedures for discovery, shared curricular goals, and peer review. Instead, the general education mosaic has many tiles, each laid down by individual artisans. Faculty members take responsibility for the academic quality of their own tiles—the natural science tile, the humanities tile, the arts tile, and so on. Each of these components may be very well made, but students and faculty alike tend to perceive them as individual course requirements only, rather than to perceive the shading, outline, contour, and contrast of the mosaic as a whole.

One might hold up the disciplinary major as a better model; disciplines do engender faculty communities that engage in reflection about a body of collective knowledge, appropriate procedures of discovery, shared curricular goals, and peer review. However, instead of focusing on shared ownership of general education by faculty, which we certainly encourage, we propose here an alternative model of responsibility shared by students and their advisors. Our unit of analysis is not the content or the delivery of general education but, rather, the development of an environ-

ment in which students learn to take shared responsibility for their own learning.

Students and General Education Reform

At best, most students consider general education an obstacle to be gotten out of the way as soon as possible on a mad dash to major courses; at worst, they consider it a devious plot on the part of colleges and universities to ensure that unpopular and irrelevant courses are filled. Thus, regardless of how compelling the imperatives driving it, general education reform—resulting in a new set of courses, new modes of instruction, new themes, or any combination of these—is unlikely to have much of an impact on students, most of whom remain unaware of the reasons for the changes.

More generally, most students do not understand the need for a general education component, which may comprise as much as one-third of their college education. This lack of awareness is compounded by the belief, reinforced by our own practices, that a college degree represents no more than the accumulation of a specified number of credits. Given that general education typically is presented to students as a subset of the total curriculum (e.g., six credits in the arts, nine credits of sciences, six credits in social sciences, and so on), is it any wonder that students approach their educations without clear, well-informed intentions?

Notwithstanding the ubiquitous talk of paradigms shifting to embrace active and engaged learning, we



continue to use the most sterile and abstract language in explaining the general education program to our students. The traditional approach is to communicate through pamphlets or booklets that have all the imagination of a computer usage manual and enough higher education jargon to challenge even the most informed among us. In some cases, colleges and universities simply provide students with a list of acceptable courses, thus reinforcing the notion that a college education is no more than an accumulation of credits.

Yet, we still believe our students will come to some profound understanding of the purposes of general education. The assumption that, by simply experiencing the designated courses, students come to appreciate the notion of general education and to understand its importance simply does not hold up in practice. In fact, this approach almost guarantees that any intended outcomes of general education reform will be lost on the recipients. Instead, students need structured opportunities to understand, plan, and implement their own general education program.

Student Planning for General Education

We propose that students and their advisors meet regularly to discuss how best to craft the available options—and how best to see general education not only within the context of the baccalaureate degrees but also as a foundation for lifelong learning. This approach requires both the active involvement of knowledgeable advisors who are sympathetic to the goals of general

education and a structured format for student reflection on individual courses of action.

Students should be required to complete a general education plan, specifying which courses they will take and, more importantly, why. One reason, for example, might be to create a specific theme within the general education categories (such as Black Studies topics, science, technology and society interactions, or methods of communication). Drawing from the arts, social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, and mathematics/computational studies, all possible themes would fulfill some of the purposes of general education, while also allowing students to craft for themselves—and to explain to themselves and to their advisors—their own rationales for their choices.

The general education curriculum also could be used to expand upon the major. This could be accomplished not through additional major courses but, instead, through collateral courses that expose students to alternate ways of understanding a particular issue. And lastly, we should not forget that general education can be used for intellectual exploration. Students should be allowed to choose courses either simply to learn about a new area or to follow up on a purely avocational interest. Using a general education program to pursue courses for no reason other than pure love of the topic should not be abandoned as a legitimate rationale.

Documenting Student Plans

Students should be required to engage in this planning exercise at least once a year

over the entire course of their collegiate studies—or at least until the general education component of the curriculum is satisfied. Rather than simply filing them away in an advising folder, students' ongoing planning documents could be incorporated into their electronic portfolios. This Web-based approach would ensure that students always have access to their plans and that they are free to alter them as necessary. Perhaps more importantly, it would provide students with a cumulative history of their own thought processes, reactions, and rationales.

This history of curricular choice would be a powerful addendum to an official transcript. Indeed, such an approach would fulfill the ultimate learning goals inherent in curricular choice. Whereas a transcript indicates only when a course was taken and which grade was assigned, this curricular choice document—chronicling the intellectual growth of students, in their own words—would serve as an instructional tool.

To provide the impetus for students and advisors to engage in this kind of sustained reflection, we recommend that credit be awarded for maintaining such a portfolio. Academic credit is the coin of the realm, and colleges and universities grant credits to students who engage in far less intellectual pursuits than understating the nature and purpose of general education and explaining their own particular choices. We leave it to individual campuses to decide how many credits are awarded, under whose auspices they are granted, and other administrative details.

Highlights from AAC&U Work

General Education and Citizenship

One of the central aims of general education is to help students develop the tools essential for constructive participation in civic affairs—the tools necessary for understanding the implications of how we view and respond to the social, political, professional, and artistic environments we inherit and then, altered for better or for worse, leave for others. Accordingly, in helping students learn to take shared responsibility for their learning, our model focuses on developing the kind of shared responsibility relationship a general education should engender for enlightened democratic citizenship.

It is critical to recognize that our current approaches for communicating general education to our students are not effective. Fulfilling the promise of our proposal will require the collaboration of many on campus, including faculty, administrators, academic advisers, students, and technology support personnel. Yet, there is much to be gained by creating shared student responsibility for general education, including a more profound understanding and appreciation of this significant component of a baccalaureate degree. Ultimately, however, we could gain better-informed citizens who would give the challenges facing contemporary society the same deliberate attention they gave to understanding how they educated themselves and why. ■

AAC&U has worked intensively on the issue of general education reform since the early 1980s. AAC&U general education initiatives aim to ensure that every undergraduate student experiences a relevant and challenging general education curriculum. In addition to working with campuses to strengthen their general education programs overall or to reform specific aspects of them (e.g., science requirements or diversity requirements), AAC&U initiatives also address strengthening general education for transfer students and embedding high expectations for general education in accrediting practices.

A comprehensive listing of AAC&U's projects, meetings, and publications on general education, as well as links to additional resources and models from AAC&U member institutions, can be found online at www.aacu.org/issues/generaleducation.

AAC&U Institute on General Education

AAC&U's recently expanded Institute on General Education creates a varied, intellectually stimulating environment for advancing campus planning in general education. In 2004, AAC&U added a track that specifically focuses on assessing general education programs and outcomes. At the institute, participants attend interactive sessions by leaders in general education reform, have informal time to share experience with other campuses, and work as campus teams with experienced consultants on planning general education reforms for their own campuses.

The 2005 Institute will take place May 20-25 in Newport, Rhode Island, on the campus of Salve Regina University. Additional information is available online at www.aacu.org/meetings/institute_gened.

Greater Expectations for Student Transfer

Greater Expectations for Student Transfer: Toward a National Dialogue on State-level Curricular Coherence is an important part of AAC&U's Greater Expectations initiative. In this project supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, AAC&U works with the state university systems of Georgia, Maryland, and Utah to identify the educational purposes of their preexisting statewide requirements; specify learning outcomes implicit in the requirements; and make the purposes of general education clear to all faculty members teaching courses that meet those requirements.

Moving beyond this stage, the three states have begun examining how to explain the aims of general education to students and what assessment strategies can best determine whether these aims are being achieved. State legislators have also participated in the project dialogues with campus leaders to improve mutual understanding of goals, particularly those related to credit transfer.

on General Education

Through this project, AAC&U is also participating with the Center for Policy Alternatives, the Kellogg Forum on Higher Education and the Public Good, and the American Council on Education in a series of regional meetings between college presidents and other higher education leaders and state legislators. These forums are designed to create and model forms for

dialogue between the two groups that can facilitate communication about non-budget issues outside the turmoil of legislative sessions.

Additional information is available online at www.aacu.org/transfer.

Selected AAC&U Publications

STRONG FOUNDATIONS: Twelve Principles for Effective General Education Programs

Recommends strategies and procedures for sustaining vitality and strength in general education. Twelve principles are drawn from practices at seventeen colleges and universities that have made a variety of improvements in general education curricula. Included are examples for strengthening general education that are appropriate to all types of colleges and universities as well as a list of project participants.

GENERAL EDUCATION: The Changing Agenda

By Jerry G. Gaff

An analysis of the changes in general education over the last two decades, since the reform of general education broke onto the scene in the late 1970s. Also focuses on several new challenges facing curriculum reformers today.

GREATER EXPECTATIONS: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College

Released October 2002, this report of the Greater Expectations National Panel calls for a new focus on excellence to better prepare students for the twenty-first century. The report recommends the creation of a New Academy characterized by high expectations, a focus on learning, commitment to demonstrated achievement, intentional practices, and an engaged, practical liberal education for all students.

THE STATUS OF GENERAL EDUCATION IN THE YEAR 2000: Summary of a National Survey

By James L. Ratcliff, D. Kent Johnson, Steven M. La Nasa, and Jerry G. Gaff

Summarizes the results of an extensive survey of undergraduate general education in a national sample of AAC&U-member colleges and universities, which was conducted by staff at AAC&U and at the Center for the Study of Higher Education at The Pennsylvania State University. It provides a snapshot of general education practice at the turn of the century, information about significant changes in the past decade, and insight into the challenges of the future.

GENERAL EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF STUDENT MOBILITY: An Invitation to Discuss Systemic Curricular Planning

Considers the challenge of designing a coherent curriculum for an increasingly mobile student population. Asks how the integrity of individual general education programs can be maintained in the face of public pressures to simplify transfer. Might colleges and universities assess students on the basis of specific learning outcomes, or will they continue to regard a random collection of credit hours as though it amounted to a meaningful education?

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Creating Learner-Centered Assessment

A Faculty-Driven Process

By Amy Driscoll, former director of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, and **Swarup Wood**, assistant professor of chemistry, both at California State University, Monterey Bay

Faculty cannot simply be *told* that assessment is important, meaningful, and full of insight for their teaching. When they view assessment as the responsibility of “someone else,” a responsibility prompted by external forces and one with little relevance to their pedagogical roles, they usually resist involvement. While most faculty readily acknowledge that assessment is important for their institutions, they seldom find individual significance in assessment work aside from what they conduct in their classrooms related to their own courses. Moreover, few faculty members have been prepared adequately to conduct assessment. Instead, they often are assigned assessment responsibilities without first being given any role in the design, scope, or intent of the work.

At California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB), we developed a constructivist process that enabled our faculty to overcome their resistance and to embrace and value outcomes-based assessment. This approach relies on a view of education as a process in which the learners (whether faculty or students) construct their knowledge (“make meaning”) from their interactions and experiences. Our process began with a course alignment project, through which faculty focused on aligning learning outcomes with the elements of their own courses. Then, through the creation of assessment protocols, the process moved to the programmatic and institutional levels. Facilitated within a constructivist context of faculty development, and beginning in general education, the process enabled our faculty to make meaning of their assessment work. Finally, the process

turned to the collaborative review and analysis of student work, evidence of achieving the learning outcomes.

Because it was initially situated within the general education program, which draws such a large number of faculty from all departments, the process promoted campus-wide involvement. In fact, many faculty participants took the insights and commitment they gained through the process back to their departments. As one participant put it, “I got so excited about this that I wanted to extend it to the whole department so we could go through the same process for our major learning outcomes.” Moreover, most of the insights about student learning in general education were easily translated for use in the major programs. The expertise faculty had developed through their participation was extended to the departments, which, in turn, enabled the next level of development and further increased faculty ownership, facilitation, and direction.

The Course Alignment Project

While in the midst of developing assessment plans for our campus, the faculty continued to raise concerns about time for assessment. They also expressed lingering doubts about its relevance for their teaching roles. In response to these concerns, we introduced the course alignment project.

Individual faculty members were encouraged to apply for mini-grants that would enable them to study their own courses by using an efficient strategy for checking the alignment of learning outcomes with their

pedagogy and the curriculum. They plotted the alignment of their class sessions, learning resources, assignments, and assessments with the course learning outcomes on a simple matrix. Faculty participation assumed that course learning outcomes were established for use in the matrix—and, more importantly, for course planning. On their own initiative or in collaboration with colleagues, however, some of the forty participants scrambled to develop or clarify or rethink outcomes before studying the alignment of learning outcomes with pedagogical strategies.

It is important to note that the course alignment project was conducted institutionally, in a non-threatening manner. There were no “right” answers; there was only the need for alignment. Individual faculty members determined the use of their own alignment data. Institutional support was available, but the responsibility and the decision-making power remained with the faculty. These individual course alignment projects created initial enthusiasm, beginning understandings, an evolving language of outcomes, and very elementary connections with teaching. This first experience effectively defused some faculty resistance; through their participation, faculty began constructing their own meanings and achieved some comfort with outcomes-based assessment.

Creating Assessment Protocols

The second major component of the process focused on the development of assessment protocols. These “packages” of outcomes, evidence, criteria, and standards

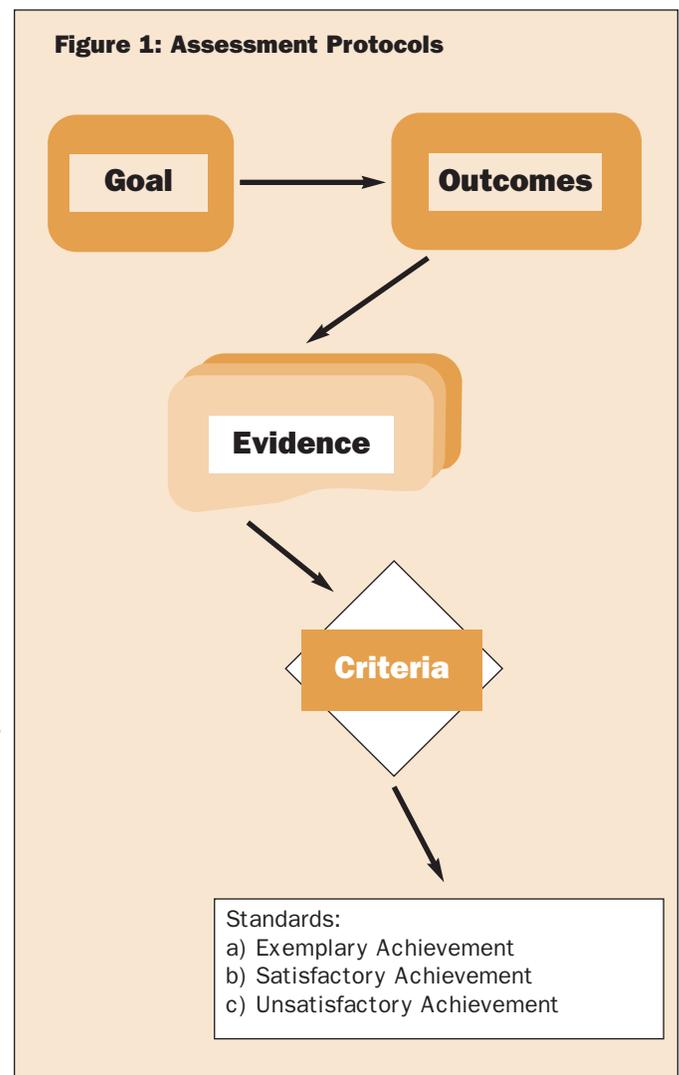
were developed first for general education and then for major programs of study. The protocols were designed to provide a consistent conceptualization of assessment, to establish a common language, and to direct development efforts for assessment campus-wide. (Figure 1 displays the design of the protocol and illustrates the relationships among its elements.) Since they had been engaged previously in outcomes development, faculty in the general education program already had some level of comfort with the approach. A very large proportion of the faculty was involved in teaching general education courses, and faculty leadership facilitated an intense commitment to refining and improving the programmatic assessment of general education.

Financial support was provided to faculty in general education learning communities who were interested in responding to the following questions:

- What will students know, do, and be when they complete our general education program?
- How will students demonstrate that they have achieved the outcomes?
- What qualities do you look for in student work?

- What qualities will distinguish exemplary student work from satisfactory work? Can you describe those qualities in ways that students can understand?
- What will distinguish our graduates?

In responding, faculty returned to the outcomes that had been developed earlier—often with hurried efforts, with little guidance, and with minimal commitment. They openly described the need to clarify, revise, and rethink their outcomes before designing student assignments. The real breakthrough came when faculty began to articulate the specific qualities (criteria)





they seek in student work (evidence of achieving outcomes). The qualities that emerged—e.g., *reflective, complex, multiple perspectives, accurate, and analytical*—clearly and directly reflected faculty values and helped to portray the kind of lifelong learners faculty wanted our graduates to become.

Although facilitated, the development of assessment protocols remained completely faculty-driven. The process valued the voice and the expertise of faculty throughout. Indeed, their efforts were

Once the assessment protocols were developed and implemented in general education courses across the campus, the information was made visible through syllabi, Web sites, program brochures, and even the university catalog. After about a year of protocol use, the faculty began collecting examples of student evidence for use in the next stage of the process. Faculty were ready and motivated for this third stage; there already was interest in, a sense of ownership of, and lingering enthusiasm for assessment work.

Because it was initially situated within the general education program, which draws such a large number of faculty from all departments, the process promoted campus-wide involvement.

sustained over a two- to three-year period primarily because the faculty increasingly found meaning in the tasks. In discussing criteria and developing standards, faculty found relevance for their teaching. Just as importantly for this early process, faculty claimed ownership of the assessment design. They gained confidence and expertise, and the focus of their conversations gradually shifted from teaching-centered concerns to learner-centered perspectives. Participants frequently asked questions like, will this be clear to students? How will this help students learn? Will this information support learning?

Analyzing Student Work

In analyzing student work, faculty once again engaged in a process of “making meaning.” Representative samples of student evidence (work submitted to demonstrate the achievement of outcomes) were gathered for review through a three-step analysis:

1. A holistic review to determine agreement on whether the outcomes had been achieved (a kind of reliability check)
2. An in-depth review to identify examples, or a lack of examples, of the criteria specified for the outcomes (a kind of validity check)

3. A final review to search for insights and implications to improve student learning (usability)

Faculty found it especially engaging to use student work as a source of information for their pedagogy. This truly learner-centered faculty development process helped to refine outcomes, evidence, criteria, and standards for general education. And more importantly, it led to significant improvements in student learning. Recordings of the work sessions helped us to identify a number of main areas that needed improvement. But even more valuable in this regard was a series of interviews conducted later with faculty participants. These interviews revealed still deeper insights for improving the pedagogy and curriculum of general education:

- The need to align teaching and learning activities with student learning outcomes through an extension of the course alignment project
- The need for more intentional scaffolding instruction in general education—from the concrete, simple, lower-level understandings and skills to the more abstract, sophisticated, higher-level understandings and skills
- The need for iterative assessment in general education; that is, the need for ongoing, scaffolded, and emerging assessment approaches that enable learners to demonstrate their learning in “bits and pieces” before putting it together in a major project or paper or exam
- The need for greater awareness of the importance of actual assignments that



provide opportunities for learners to demonstrate achievement of outcomes

Awareness of these specific needs emerged over several years through ongoing review. Other needs also emerged, including the need for ongoing collaborative discussions among faculty to truly develop shared understandings of the outcomes. Repeatedly, faculty acknowledged and honored the importance of assessment for reflecting on their teaching and for yielding insights to improve student learning.

One additional need, acknowledged in the second round of review, was particularly difficult for faculty to admit publicly. Reviews of a large amount of student work revealed that, in the first two years and possibly beyond, learners have difficulty with complex capacities such as analysis, synthesis, reflection, and interpretation. In the midst of their conversations, some faculty acknowledged their own feelings of inadequacy with respect to helping students develop these capacities. "I'm not sure that I know how to synthesize very well," one faculty member said, "and I definitely don't know how to teach students to synthesize." These conversations led to collaboratively planned faculty development sessions. Faculty identified colleagues with the appropriate pedagogical expertise and, using Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy, a series called "Blooming Pedagogies" is now being offered in response to this faculty-identified need. We hope future reviews of student work will reveal corresponding improvements in student learning.

Conclusion

The process developed at CSUMB engaged faculty in knowledge-building communities. Faculty collaboration went beyond the exchange of information typical of faculty development efforts to the co-construction and design of something meaningful to them. Through these experiences, faculty reimaged in generative ways their own identities, relationships, and roles. Assessment became an educational value to the faculty, whose definition of assessment as pedagogy was actualized both for themselves and for their students. The interview studies revealed that 90 percent of the faculty made changes and improvements directed to student learning as a result of their collaborative analysis of student work.

Beginning our assessment work in general education had a galvanizing effect. The process unified the faculty and promoted their confidence and expertise in the assessment of student learning. The meanings of the faculty's work focused on responsibility for, and improvement of, student learning. As a result, faculty created learner-centered assessment approaches and developed a shared sense of commitment and ownership—qualities that will sustain and enhance their ongoing engagement. ■

In addition to its annual meeting, AAC&U offers a series of working conferences and institutes each year. Additional information about the upcoming meetings listed below is available online at www.aacu.org/meetings.

2005 Annual Meeting

January 26-29, 2005

Liberal Education and the New Academy: Raising Expectations, Keeping Promises
San Francisco, California

Network for Academic Renewal Meetings

February 17-19, 2005

General Education and Assessment: Creating Shared Responsibility for Learning Across the Curriculum
Atlanta, Georgia

April 14-16, 2005

Pedagogies of Engagement: Deepening Learning In and Across the Disciplines
Greater Washington, DC

Summer Institutes

May 20-25, 2005

The Institute on General Education
Newport, Rhode Island

June 22-26, 2005

The Greater Expectations Institute
Burlington, Vermont



Designing a Signature General Education Program

By **Stephen L. Trainor**, dean of undergraduate studies, Salve Regina University

Notoriously contentious and protracted, efforts to reform general education curricula can prove frustrating for the participants, and they often end in failure. In particular, the goal of producing a signature program—a curriculum that captures the distinctive mission and essence of an institution—often remains elusive, sacrificed to the exigencies of political compromise or financial constraints. The source of the problem usually can be traced to the process involved in a given curricular reform. In its effort to develop a new signature general education curriculum, Salve Regina University was able to avoid many of the usual pitfalls by adopting a formal problem-solving model that emphasizes creativity and involves the entire faculty in the process.

How Does the Process Affect the Outcome?

The problem is not that colleges and universities do not pay attention to process; rather, difficulties arise from their failure to anticipate the results a given process is likely to produce. In designing a signature program, the typical procedure is to appoint a committee to produce a curricular model and then present it to the entire faculty for consideration, debate, and a vote. Great care is taken to ensure that all viewpoints are represented on this committee, in the hope that the final model will produce consensus among the larger faculty. While it seems plausible on the surface, this process is, for a variety of reasons, unlikely to produce a distinctive signature program.

Precisely because they were chosen as representatives, the committee members are concerned to speak

for their constituents' interests—the liberal arts, the professional programs, the humanities or the social sciences, the territory of a single department or discipline. It is the rare faculty member who can transcend his or her own area and speak for the institution as a whole. Thus, this typical process practically guarantees that the committee will be at odds with itself in most of its deliberations.

To produce a model that will achieve consensus among the faculty is a laudable goal; the core curriculum should have widespread support. Yet in striving to reach this elusive goal, the committee may be forced to sacrifice the more distinctive elements of any signature model in favor of domestic harmony. Accordingly, the most likely outcome is a least-common-denominator model designed to offend no one and to garner the necessary votes from the wider faculty.

Because they are established up front and the model is developed to satisfy them, the criteria for the new curriculum actually are design elements in disguise. As such, these restrictive criteria can undermine the committee's ability to come up with a distinctive signature program. Finally, since the committee's task is to produce a single model, the voting faculty's only comparative frame of reference is the current core curriculum (aka the devil that you know).

A Creative Problem-Solving Model

At Salve Regina University, we were able to avoid many of these problems by adopting a problem-solving model outlined by Vincent Ryan Ruggiero (2003). Ruggiero's



model calls for a progression of four stages: (1) *being aware*, which involves gathering information and defining the problem; (2) *being creative*, which asks the problem-solvers to generate as many creative solutions as possible; (3) *being critical*, which asks participants to set aside the proposed solutions while they develop the criteria by which the solutions will be judged; and (4) *communicating or acting*, which calls for the selection of a solution based on the criteria and implementing that solution.

This model posits a process that is, in a number of ways, counterintuitive but that nonetheless effectively addresses the process problems discussed above. Rather than a representative committee, the process adopted at Salve Regina calls for multiple design teams brought together by common interests and vision. Every faculty member, either individually or in groups, is invited to propose a model curriculum. Rather than developing a compromise model designed to build consensus, the process calls for choosing whichever model receives a majority of the faculty votes; presumably, that model best represents the university's idea of an integrated signature curriculum.

In order to foster creativity, Ruggiero's model reverses the anticipated order of activities by placing the development of criteria after the brainstorming of solutions. Faculty are thus free to focus on developing a distinctive "dream" curriculum without the usual constraints. The development of a variety of models offers the faculty a broader range of choices than the "take it or leave it" approach implied in the single committee, single curriculum process.

At Salve Regina, we considered a common understanding of the process to be so important that we asked the faculty to endorse it in a formal vote, at which point the stages were linked to a strict timetable designed to get to a decision by the time of the faculty's annual post-commencement meeting in May. A steering committee, composed of eight faculty members and the undergraduate dean, was established to oversee the process and to ensure adherence to the schedule. The process itself suggested a variety of questions along the way, questions worth considering in the development of any signature program.

Stage One: What Is the Problem You Want to Solve?

The first task of the steering committee was to define the problem clearly. One aspect of the problem turned on the question of mission. The university community recently had completed a two-year process to develop a new mission statement, and many perceived a cognitive disconnect between the new mission and the set of distribution requirements in place at the time. A second aspect of the problem turned on integrative learning. The distribution requirements had no internal frame of reference or connection; there was no philosophy, no theme, no developmental structure, no interdisciplinary cooperation.

In the end, the steering committee was able to articulate the general dissatisfaction with the current core in a way that gave shape and direction to the problem-solving process. It proposed to the faculty assembly the following clearly defined task: to create a core curriculum of liberal arts and sciences that includes explicit goals and measurable objec-

tives and that is (1) grounded in the university's mission as a Catholic institution founded by the Sisters of Mercy, "to work for a world that is harmonious, just, and merciful," and that is (2) integrated by cooperation.

Stage Two: How Can You Tap into the Creativity of the Faculty?

Ruggiero's model fosters creativity by reversing the anticipated order of events. Instead of specifying criteria first and then tailoring the solution to fit them, the process asks participants to generate solutions before criteria are established. This is particularly challenging for academics who, usually more critical than creative by training, are apt to want to know the criteria first. But it is Ruggiero's particular insight to see that *a priori* criteria can be thought-stoppers. If one begins with a given set of constraints—e.g., the core will have an upper limit of thirty-nine credit hours; the core will be delivered by the current faculty; the core will not touch the current requirements in English, or history, or modern languages; the core must be completed by the end of sophomore year; the core will not cost any more money than the current curriculum—one can with some accuracy predict the outcome, which is likely to bear a striking resemblance to the status quo. Ruggiero avoids this problem by proscribing the creation of criteria until a number of creative solutions have been generated. Liberated from considerations of staffing and cost (which are administrative problems, anyway) and from the need to achieve consensus on credit allocations (which are turf matters rather than curricular principles), faculty are free to focus on their real task: designing a

signature curriculum that reflects the mission and character of the institution.

By the deadline established by Salve Regina's steering committee, five fully developed models and some eighteen focused suggestions had emerged. Two of the models were proposed by individuals, three by teams of two to seven faculty members. The range of approaches and educational philosophies put forth is suggested by the titles of the five models:

- The Seven Frames of Salve Regina University
- The Millennium Core
- Classics Program
- Preparation for Lifelong Learning and World Citizenship
- Searching for a Meaningful Life

The focused suggestions ranged from recommendations about information literacy to competency in the sciences to the inclusion of service learning. The models and the suggestions were collected in a packet and presented, with an opportunity for questions and discussion, at an open session attended by the faculty, the academic administration, and the university's president. The presentation of five fully developed models created a sense of excitement about the process and confidence about the future. The general consensus was that any one of the new models would be much better than the status quo.

Stage Three: How Do You Evaluate the Proposed Models?

At this stage of the process, participants set aside the solutions proposed in Stage Two and develop the criteria by which those solutions will be judged. The challenge is to cre-

ate a set of criteria independent of the existing possible solutions. This is particularly difficult in smaller problem-solving processes where the participants involved in developing Stage Three criteria are the same as those who proposed solutions in Stage Two. At Salve Regina, these difficulties were addressed by a division of labor between the steering committee and the self-generated design teams. Before the solutions were proposed, the steering committee, whose members were not permitted to participate in model design, had set about developing criteria but kept them in strict confidence.

After the five proposed models were presented to the full faculty and academic administration, the steering committee publicly presented its criteria to the faculty assembly. Their original proposal included the following points:

- How is the proposed curriculum based on the concept of the liberal arts and sciences?
 - How will the university be able to measure the extent to which the explicit goals and outcomes of the proposal are being achieved?
 - How does the proposal implement the university's mission to encourage students to seek wisdom and to "work for a world that is harmonious, just, and merciful"?
 - How is the proposed curriculum integrated by cooperation?
- In the discussions on the floor of the assembly, various other criteria were proposed and debated; ultimately, two more were added:
- How does the proposed curriculum present all undergraduates with expectations and standards that promote the development of intellect and character?

- How does the proposed curriculum prepare students for a lifetime of learning, service, and career choices?

The faculty involved in developing the five models were asked to explain in writing how their proposals addressed the criteria, and their answers were collected and published to the faculty at large. These faculty also were free to amend their original proposals to address the criteria; however, it was important for the process that they were under no obligation to do so.

Stage Four: Which Model Do You Want?

The final stage calls for judging the proposed solutions against the established criteria and selecting a model. Rather than merely using the criteria as a checklist, Stage Four involves choosing the model that is deemed the most effective and attractive in terms of the criteria. Rather than compromising the overall integrity of the model to match the list of criteria perfectly, it may be advisable to overlook weaknesses in satisfying one criterion in view of strengths in satisfying others.

At Salve Regina, the final selection of the model took place over two days at a post-commencement faculty meeting conducted by the officers of the faculty assembly. At this stage in the process, all members of the faculty were vitally engaged in the discussions and debates. For example, the faculty in the professional departments, who had not been extensively involved in proposing possible models, now emerged as important decision makers. They critiqued the various models and argued for or against them. In a straw poll taken at the end of the first day, two models clearly were shown to



have widespread support. On the next day, the faculty formally endorsed the model that had garnered the most votes in the straw poll. This model still needed much work; indeed, it required two more years of development before the first courses were offered. Nonetheless, a distinctive, signature curricular model had been selected over the course of a single academic year.

Conclusion

Institutions about to embark on a general education curricular revision should give careful attention to process, and particularly to the kind of outcomes a given process is likely to produce. While consensus is a laudable goal in the selection of a model, it can be an impediment at the design level, especially if the goal is to design a distinctive signature program. The Ruggiero problem-solving model used at Salve Regina University had the effect of tapping into faculty creativity by inviting a variety of groups and individuals to propose curricular models and deferring the definition of selection criteria until after the models were published. Thus, faculty members were free to concentrate on mission, content, skills, and pedagogy without worrying about pleasing all possible constituencies and interest groups. When the time came to select a model, the faculty assembly had five distinctive programs to choose from, and the model selected clearly reflected the university mission statement in a high-profile, signature design. ■

Reference

Ruggiero, Vincent Ryan. 2003. *The art of thinking: A guide to critical and creative thought*. New York: Longman.

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Beyond Transferability

State Systems and General Education

By **Robert E. Shoenberg**, senior fellow, Association of American Colleges and Universities*

However intrusive state higher education governing or coordinating boards (SHEEOs) may sometimes seem to colleges and universities jealous of their own autonomy, from a public point of view these commissions—and the university system offices, which often take on similar roles—fulfill a vital protective function. Nowhere do they better serve the public than in the matter of student transfer. With nearly 60 percent of bachelor's degree recipients having done some substantial portion of their work at more than one institution, the efficiency of credit transfer has become a major policy issue. Facilitating student movement among institutions in a state system is essential not only with regard to cost containment for both students and the public purse, but also as a matter of simple fairness to all involved. The work that the state coordinating and governing agencies have done in recent years in making transfer within their jurisdictions more rational and equitable has helped students substantially and done a great deal for the image of colleges and universities.

As *efficient* as the hard-won statewide “articulation agreements” may be, and as reassuring to students and legislators, the attention they pay to educational *effectiveness* usually ranges from slim to none. For the most part, these agreements focus exclusively on the correspondence of subject matter treated in courses. Is it psychology? Is it biology? Is it art history? If it is, then it transfers. Almost never do the rules governing course

articulation attend to the more important question of a correspondence of purposes to which the subject matter is taught. Does the introductory physics course focus primarily on the nature of scientific investigation and the consequences of a scientific mind-set on human history and contemporary society? Or does the course take a more parochial view, asking students only to learn and apply to problem sets some basic concepts of the field? Does the introduction to art history deal with the nature of visual representation? Or does it focus primarily on acquainting students with the major artists and typical technical and expressive modes of different periods? As far as most articulation agreements go, these distinctly different approaches to the subject matter are irrelevant. As long as the subject matter is physics or art history, nothing else matters.

Some state systems have become uncomfortable with the notion that, in the interest of fairness and efficiency, it is educationally justifiable to consider as equivalent for purposes of awarding transfer credit any course that deals with similar subject matter. Some institutions that have distinctive and purposefully designed programs bristle at the notion that they must accept in transfer any course with subject matter that corresponds to theirs. They feel that the coherence of their program and the meaning of their degree are subverted by having to accept courses in transfer that are not congruent with their concept of baccalaureate education.

**With gratitude to Kathryn Mueller, who carried out the enormous task of surveying general education programs and practices in the fifty states. While she gathered the information, I bear sole responsibility for the categorization and any misjudgments attendant thereon.*

Conversely, they and their students are angered by the difficulties in transferring courses whose subject matter is interdisciplinary or “different” in some other ways. Any community college that tries to mount a general education program that is not “plain vanilla” is asking for trouble with getting their students’ courses transferred.

By and large, statewide articulation agreements do not address these issues. These policy guidelines are the product of extensive negotiation among many parties, each with its own interests to protect, brokered by the higher education governing or coordinating board. Usually, both the board and the institutions are acting under legislative directive, or the threat of such a directive, to get their transfer policies in order and stop costing students and the state time and money. The legislatures and the public they represent cannot be bothered by such subtle matters as equivalence of purpose. Some of a system’s campuses may not want to be held to any such equivalence because, corporately and in the persons of individual faculty members, they wish, as a general principle, to protect their autonomy. And so they settle on the lowest-common-denominator standard of subject matter equivalence.

The principal advantage to creating a sieve with such a large mesh is that almost nothing gets screened out. Community colleges do not have to worry so much that their courses won’t transfer to particular institutions. Receiving institutions spend much less time on evaluating transcripts. Disputes almost never arise or are quickly resolved.

The scandal of such practices is that they define a system devoid of a sense of educational purpose. The emphasis is entirely on efficiency. Students are offered no help in developing a sense of why they are taking courses other than to satisfy a requirement that they study certain subject matters. Those transferring between institutions with different approaches to general education end up with an incoherent collection of courses that satisfy requirements but add up to no more than the sum of the parts.

purposes and coherence, providing an answer to the question, “why do I have to take this course?”

Our sources of information were SHEEO Web sites and, through direct contact, SHEEO academic officers. In the end we were able to obtain information from forty-eight of the fifty states. We classified the states’ policies and practices in several different ways and noted some features that were peculiar to individual states. We acknowledge that the decision to put any state’s requirements or practices in a given

Those transferring between institutions with different approaches to general education end up with an incoherent collection of courses that satisfy requirements but add up to no more than the sum of the parts.

Survey Findings

During the summer of 2003, AAC&U conducted an informal survey of the fifty state SHEEOs to determine the nature of the minimum general education requirements for all students receiving the baccalaureate degree. We were particularly interested in the way the states frame these requirements. Ultimately, we wanted to learn which states provide a rationale for the requirements and have processes in place that provide some assurance that all campuses teach courses in particular general education categories to a common purpose. In other words, we were looking for states that pay some attention to curricular

category may be somewhat arbitrary or based on inadequate information. Often, SHEEO Web sites were unhelpful or direct requests for information were left unanswered. Allowing for slippage of this sort, here is what we learned.

- All states have a system for facilitating transfer of course credit among institutions. Nearly all of these systems are based on the disciplinary area in which the course is taught and, except in a handful of cases, speak not at all to correspondence of course purposes. The only kinds of cases in which courses in a particular discipline will not transfer are those considered to be below college level

(largely in reading, English composition, and mathematics) or too “vocational.” Such systems, because so heavily based on standard models of academic discipline, also have difficulty dealing with interdisciplinary courses.

- All but ten states have a minimum general education package that all institutions in the state must embody in their general education programs. These requirements range from thirty to forty-eight credits, with clustering in the thirty to thirty-three and the forty to forty-two ranges. The various forms in which this requirement is couched are summarized in the box below.
- The standard package of required general education courses invariably includes English composition, mathematics, and a distribution requirement consisting of some number of courses/credits in science, social science, humanities, and often the arts. Only seventeen of the thirty-eight states in our survey that have such a statewide general education minimum requirement go beyond this standard package.
- Of the thirty-eight states, only ten offer a substantial statement of the purposes of their requirements. The rest either are silent on the matter or offer a short paragraph on the value of general education, without reference to a rationale for particular requirements.
- Fourteen states have some sort of state-level review of individual campus courses or programs to assure that they address the subject matter/competency requirements set forth in regulation. Most reviews simply consider the subject matter covered, as

opposed to the purposes to which the course is taught (e.g., is it physics? is it literature?). The exceptions, the states that do focus on purposes as well as subject matter, are Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Missouri, New York, and Minnesota (state colleges and universities).

The pervasiveness of the standard package, even the list of the kinds of courses that go beyond it, reflects the profound conservatism of state-level requirements and, by extension, the institutions that control the setting of these requirements. In the category of general intellectual skills, four states specify critical thinking, three ethical reasoning, and one lifelong learning and development. Specific academic skill requirements, beyond English composition and mathematics, include oral communication and technology (five states each). Colorado requires specific attention to critical reading in the context of general education subject matter courses.

Two areas that have more recently entered the general education canon, diversity in American society and global awareness, are required elements in gen-

eral education in five states each. Three of these five states require attention to both.

No particular subject matter seems to be required with much frequency. Three states specify history rather than including it in the humanities or social sciences. Economics or political science is specified in two states, while a course in one of these or in American history constitute the options in Utah’s unique “American Civilization” requirement. Subjects of study included in the general education package in one state each include the environment (Minnesota), philosophy (Connecticut), foreign language (New York), and physical education (Tennessee). Ohio requires an interdisciplinary course.

The fact that only the Ohio transfer package makes specific reference to interdisciplinary work illustrates a defining characteristic of the state programs: their orientation toward individual subject matters as represented by academic departments. These bland sets of requirements are designed to reflect the lowest common denominator of general education programs that are actually in place at most institutions,

State General Education Requirements

- Twenty-five states specify the subject matters and numbers of credits that must be included in any campus’s general education program.
- Nine states outline a “package” of general education courses that if completed at one institution will transfer to any other and fulfill most general education requirements: i.e., an artificial “consensus” program.
- Four states specify that completing an approved program at one institution will constitute satisfaction of lower-division general education requirements at the receiving institution.
- Ten states have no statewide general education requirement at all.

even though individual institutions may have more complex, extensive, and imaginative general requirements. Because they were the product of compromise among the many parties sitting at the table when the transfer policy was hammered out, they are structured to require the least adjustment possible at any institution. Equally important to their designers, they had to create the fewest problems possible for students transferring from two-year to four-year institutions and make it convenient for the two-year institutions' general education programs to transfer intact to four-year institutions. Interdisciplinary or other requirements not readily identifiable with the standard structure of knowledge has the potential for creating awkwardness.

The Colorado Model

Of the state-level programs about which we have detailed knowledge, Colorado best combines a clear statement of course purposes with a mechanism to provide some assurance that these purposes are addressed in general education offerings throughout the state. The program of "State Guaranteed Student Transfer" is voluntary in the sense that institutions are not required to submit courses, but those they do submit and get approved become part of a registry of courses that are accepted to meet particular general education requirements at all state institutions. Institutions from which many students transfer find it greatly to their advantage to participate extensively.

The Colorado program is characterized by state-level approval of individual general education courses based on well-

defined criteria. Committees drawn from the faculty at both two-year and four-year institutions meet annually to approve courses submitted for guaranteed transfer status in each of five "content areas" (communication, arts and humanities, mathematics, natural and physical sciences, and social and behavioral sciences) and five "competency areas" (critical thinking, written communication, technology, reading, and mathematics). This dual structure of content area courses with specific expectations of attention to the competencies creates an extensive "across the curriculum" structure. (Examples of criteria for course approval can be found online at www.state.co.us/cche/academic/transfer/index.html.)

The Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) is responsible for administering the course approval process and maintaining the list of guaranteed transfer courses. The "GE-25 Committee," made up of representatives from each public institution in the state, advises CCHE on policy and process. Course approval rests with large faculty committees in each content area. In the first two years of program operation, several hundred courses have been approved.

The program is not without its problems, such as dealing with interdisciplinary courses or the difficulty the larger institutions have in satisfying the writing requirement in the context of the large lecture courses that characterize their general education offerings. These concerns do not, however, diminish Colorado's considerable accomplishment in developing a clear statement of general

education purposes that integrally addresses both content and competencies. The clearly stated criteria for course approval specify the ends to which a course in a particular area is to be taught without restricting either the means or the specific content of the course. If these specifications can be rendered as clear statements of purpose, students should have no confusion about the purposes of general education no matter where they may find themselves in the system.

The Colorado model suggests the role that SHEEO's can play—indeed must play—in creating intentionality and coherence in the educational programs of undergraduate students. With the majority of current baccalaureate graduates attending multiple institutions in the same state, the college awarding the degree cannot be responsible for the coherence of many of its graduates' programs, especially if the college is expected to accept all the student's prior credits. If courses that satisfy a particular requirement, no matter where they are taught, share a common purpose, students are more likely to come away from their general education experience with some sense of program purpose and coherence. Faculty members and advisors working within such a structure should be able to help students toward this understanding.

Our survey suggests that most state systems have not yet taken on this challenge, which is as much political as educational. One would hope that the small but growing number of states that have made good progress might encourage others to answer the students' question, "why do I have to take this course?" ■

Highlights from AAC&U Work on Assessment

AAC&U works with campuses to develop meaningful and sophisticated assessments that inform and improve practices to foster greater achievement for all students. AAC&U provides campuses with tools to assess learning in ways that help improve educational programs and provide useful information to key stakeholders.

AAC&U has also published a series on the challenges of assessing campus diversity initiatives and programs. AAC&U began in 2004 to publish a series of papers, manuals, and statements on issues of accountability and the assessment of key learning outcomes.

A comprehensive listing of AAC&U's ongoing work on assessment, as well as links to additional information and resources, can be found online at www.aacu.org/issues/assessment.

Greater Expectations Project on Accreditation and Assessment

Taking advantage of a unique moment when both regional and specialized accreditors were revising their standards and processes, this project encouraged greater emphasis on liberal learning outcomes and the institutional demonstration of students' sophisticated intellectual capacities. Those involved in the project included representatives from all six regional accrediting associations, four specialized accreditors, one national accreditor, the accrediting coordinator, and seven higher education associations. Some also held faculty or administrative positions on campuses.

The project achieved agreement on the mission of a twenty-first century liberal education; the desired outcomes from a liberal education; curricular design principles that can help students reach these desired outcomes; and criteria for good practice in assessment of such outcomes. A report from the project, *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree*, documents the consensus among these divergent groups about the importance of liberal learning outcomes for all students, whatever their major.

Additional information is available online at www.aacu.org/gex/paa

James Irvine Foundation Campus Diversity Initiative Evaluation Project

This project seeks to determine the impact of the James Irvine Foundation's efforts to help institutions prepare all students for leadership in a diverse society and to promote the success of underrepresented student populations. The project works with campuses to increase institutional capacity to perform effective

and meaningful evaluations of their diversity efforts and is assessing the overall impact of the Foundation's Campus Diversity Initiative program. With support from the Foundation, the Claremont Graduate University and the AAC&U have formed a partnership to lead this endeavor.

Additional information is available online at www.aacu.org/irvinediveval.

Selected AAC&U Publications

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE QUALITY OF THE BACCALAUREATE DEGREE

This short monograph describes the emerging consensus among accreditors and other educational leaders about liberal learning outcomes essential for all baccalaureate graduates. Authors discuss the necessary connections between general education and the major in achieving these key outcomes, while offering examples of their assessment in a variety of institutional settings. Implications for action are included.

OUR STUDENTS' BEST WORK: A Framework for Accountability Worthy of Our Mission

Designed to help campuses respond to demands for greater accountability, this statement from AAC&U's board of directors calls for assessments that measure higher-order learning aims. It sketches out five key educational outcomes, offers a set of principles for higher education accountability, and suggests a set of accountability questions every college or university should ask. Ideal for dialogues on assessment of student learning with campus leaders, trustees, or public officials.

ASSESSING CAMPUS DIVERSITY INITIATIVES: A Guide for Campus Practitioners

By Mildred García, Cynthia Hudgins, Caryn McTighe Musil, Michael T. Nettles, William E. Sedlacek, and Daryl G. Smith

Provides tips and tools for designing and developing effective diversity evaluations. Topics addressed include the need for assessment, designing an evaluation plan, institutional context, audience, data collection and analysis, performance indicators, and theoretical models. Also included are sample assessment and evaluation tools from campuses across the country.

For more information about these and other AAC&U publications, or to place an order, visit www.aacu.org/publications, e-mail pub_desk@aacu.org, or call 1.800.297.3775.

Our Students' Best Work

A Framework for Accountability Worthy of Our Mission

The following is an abridgement of a statement recently issued by the board of directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The full text of this statement is available online at www.aacu.org. Printed copies also are available.

For the past two decades, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has repeatedly called for the academy to take responsibility for assessing the quality of student learning in college. The vision developed in its 1984 report, *Integrity in the College Curriculum*, and, most recently, in its 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, contains three elements: (1) a clearly articulated, collective conception of the qualities of a college-educated person; (2) intentionality and coherence in educational programs to cultivate those qualities; and (3) assessment to determine the extent to which the desired learning has been achieved.

Yet, despite the development over the past two decades of a veritable “assessment movement,” too many institutions and programs still are unable to answer legitimate questions about what their students are learning in college.

The lack of evidence on student learning outcomes has proved damaging. In the absence of consistent and broad-based leadership on assessment and accountability from the academy, a politically popular accountability ideology has swept statehouses across the country and is capturing the allegiance of many lawmakers of both major parties. This alternative ideology, in brief, threatens to short-change accountability by holding the academy to standards for students' higher learning that are much too low.

While specific accountability proposals from this new source vary, they have one feature in common. They regard a particular kind of standardized testing—multiple-

choice, “one-best-answer” tests—as the right way to assess student knowledge and hold the academy “accountable.” Leaders of the testing industry encourage enthusiasm for this kind of thinking by extolling the virtues of their tests.

Interest in mass testing has been fueled nationally by the No Child Left Behind law that mandates school testing in multiple grades. Schools that do not measure up on the chosen tests face serious consequences. While it is certainly a major step forward to hold the schools accountable for all students' academic achievement, knowledgeable researchers have pointed to multiple problems with the state tests being used at various levels, including in high schools. For example, many state high school tests still focus only on easy-to-measure factual knowledge and reactive answers (Achieve 2002), rather than higher-order abilities such as critical thinking, evidence-based reasoning, integrative thinking, and problem solving. Most of the state tests evaluate only a ninth- or tenth-grade level of achievement (Achieve 2004).

Ignoring these problems, many policy makers now want to use the same logic and make a similar form of mass testing the focus of accountability in higher education. This would be an enormous misuse of time and scarce resources. It is the wrong approach to the challenge of holding higher education accountable.

Students study at the college level in hundreds of different academic departments and programs. These programs reflect very different communities of inquiry and practice. The kind of tests being used for school

assessment cannot begin to probe the distinctive forms of excellence expected across this multitude of different fields.

Assessing what students have learned in colleges and universities requires a sophisticated understanding both of context and of how knowledge and skills are to be used. Students typically do their best and most advanced work in their major fields of specialization, and they should be held accountable for knowledge and skills that are deemed essential at an advanced level, whether the field is physics, psychology, or pharmacy.

What is regarded as excellent writing in chemistry, for example, because of its direct, descriptive, and succinct language, is very different from the well-told analytical narrative in history or the evidence-based scan of policy alternatives appropriate to public administration. A common test of communication skills cannot probe students' highest skill level, because advanced skill takes different forms in different fields. Professional fields such as law and medicine do not test educational accomplishments with the same generic test, and undergraduate institutions should not do so either.

This does not mean educators and educational institutions should be exempt from accountability. Rather, accountability for the highest standards of learning calls for new forms of critical inquiry and reflective practice—forms that are both appropriate to higher education's mission and feasible in the contemporary academy.

There is considerable promise in tests now being developed that give students a small library of new materials related to a

problem in a particular domain (e.g., the social sciences) and ask them both to assess the quality of the evidence and to write complex answers to questions based on the evidence (taking into account its limitations). Measures such as these come significantly closer to life's real challenges and therefore are more appropriate as assessments of college education.

Such tests are not yet widely available. Eventually, they may complement discipline-centered assessments by providing evidence of students' abilities to apply both knowledge and analytical skills in domains of learning such as the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts. But even if better tests emerge, standardized tests alone are an inadequate and inappropriate strategy to foster advanced learning and accountability in higher education.

What Is to Be Done?

AAC&U affirms that accountability is essential, but that the form it takes must be worthy of our mission. This means we must hold ourselves accountable for assessing our students' best work, not generic skills and not introductory levels of learning. Any accountability framework must first, of course, respect the diversity of institutional missions and students' educational goals in the contemporary academy. The framework suggested below is designed to accommodate differences in institutional mission while still holding higher education institutions accountable for a set of key learning outcomes that all college graduates should achieve regardless of their field of study or choice of institution.

The first step is to establish clarity about the kinds of learning that make a difference for all college graduates over time: as thoughtful people, as participants in the economy, and as citizens.

AAC&U's nearly 950 college and university members represent the spectrum of postsecondary institutions: two-year and four-year; public and private; large and small. All are committed to ensuring that every student experiences the benefits—intellectual, economic, civic, social, and intercultural—of a well-designed and intellectually challenging liberal education.

Liberal education, as a respected educational tradition, has guided U.S. colleges and universities to unrivaled, world-class standing. Any tradition with deep historical roots necessarily adapts to reflect the many social, economic, cultural, and technological changes that occur over the years. Consider two examples. In the nineteenth century, liberal education primarily served young men who were preparing for leadership positions, often in the clergy, medicine, and law. Now, liberal education aims to be inclusive and to provide an empowering education to widely diverse students. In the twentieth century, many came to contrast liberal education with professional education and to regard it as, by definition, not "practical." But in today's knowledge-based economy, a good liberal education embraces science and new technologies, hands-on research, global knowledge, teamwork, cross-cultural learning, active engagement with the world beyond the academy, and a commitment to lifelong learning, as well as the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

These forms of learning provide a strong foundation for success in a dynamic economy. They are also essential as a foundation for civic participation and for a meaningful life.

The opposite of liberal education is narrow, situation-specific training. While situation-specific training has many good uses, by itself it is insufficient preparation for a world characterized by complexity, conflicting judgments, and accelerating change. Even students in technical fields, therefore, need and deserve the complementary benefits of a liberal education to help them make sense of the social and environmental contexts in which they will use their skills, and to prepare them for lifelong work rather than just an initial job.

In short, a contemporary liberal education rests on a vital historic tradition and reflects current realities. New frameworks for educational accountability should focus on students' high level of achievement in the college outcomes that characterize a liberal education.

Focusing on Key Educational Outcomes

The public has questions about the quality of education that colleges and universities are providing, and it deserves to know how well students are doing. It is time for leaders of education to embrace a small number of highly valued and widely affirmed educational goals, establish high standards for each, and assess their achievement across the curriculum.

AAC&U has summarized several aims of undergraduate liberal education in its 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision*

for *Learning as a Nation Goes to College*. We propose selecting from them five key outcomes as a concentrated focus for assessment (see sidebar). These outcomes for student learning are not arbitrarily chosen. Rather, there is an emerging consensus across many professions, the business community, civic leadership, and the academy that these liberal education capabilities are valuable for work, citizenship, and a satisfying life.

In a recent comparison of their standards for accreditation, for example, leaders from several professions, the regional accreditation organizations, industry, and educational associations discovered that they all viewed these key outcomes as integral aspects of a good education and, in the case of the professions, of preparation for business, education, engineering, and nursing (AAC&U 2004).

These outcomes are valuable, it is now widely agreed, because they prepare students to bring knowledge, experience, and reflective judgment to the complexity of the contemporary world. They give graduates a strong foundation to deal with issues that are challenging, unscripted, and often vigorously contested. They teach students to find and evaluate evidence and to take into account competing perspectives as they form judgments about significant questions. They help develop both a respect for the value of human diversity and a set of internal values that serve as a compass in an era of accelerating change.

Cultivating and Assessing Liberal Education Outcomes

These liberal education outcomes will reach their highest level of cultivation in the con-

text of the student's area of specialization or major field(s), where advanced achievement appropriately takes different forms.

In other words, even though the outcomes characteristic of liberal education can be described generally, they must be cultivated and assessed in context.

Analytical skill, for example, has one kind of applied meaning for an English major, and a quite different kind of applied meaning for an engineer. Similarly, the civic, social, or intercultural questions faced by a student preparing for teaching are likely to be very different from those encountered by a student studying economics or biology.

These insights point toward a curricular strategy for educational accountability, rather than a reliance on standardized and generic testing. The five key outcomes of liberal learning should be addressed and

Five Key Learning Outcomes

1. Strong analytical, communication, quantitative, and information skills
2. Deep understanding of and hands-on experience with the inquiry practices of disciplines that explore the natural, social, and cultural realms
3. Intercultural knowledge and collaborative problem-solving skills
4. A proactive sense of responsibility for individual, civic, and social choices
5. Habits of mind that foster integrative thinking and the ability to transfer skills and knowledge from one setting to another

cultivated throughout the entire educational experience. Whatever the field of study, therefore, a student's progress in achieving liberal education outcomes ought to be assessed periodically from the initial to the final year, in both general education and the chosen major field(s). Within the college or university context, a comprehensive accountability and assessment framework should include an orientation, a plan of study, milestone assessments, and capstone or culminating experiences.

An important foundation for this approach to accountability has already been laid at many colleges and universities. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reports that 58 percent of college seniors currently are expected to complete a capstone or culminating experience of some kind (NSSE 2003). Typically, capstones are completed in the student's major field, although some institutions require capstone experiences in general education as well.

Many other institutions and programs already require students to compile portfolios of their work as a requirement for graduation. Experiments are underway across the country to put such portfolios online.

Capstone projects and portfolios provide promising anchors for a meaningful approach to educational accountability. They provide contexts in which student work can be assessed for the crosscutting outcomes of liberal education described above as well as for conceptual knowledge and skills appropriate to the students' selected major(s).

In some cases, assignments for portfolios and capstones may need redesign to encompass the array of important liberal

education outcomes. In other cases, the primary change needed will be a fuller reading of the available evidence on student's cumulative achievement of the key liberal education outcomes.

Summarizing Results and Reporting to the Public

In the current climate it is not enough for an institution to assess its students in ways that are grounded in the curriculum; colleges and universities also must provide useful knowledge to the public about goals, standards, accountability practices, and the quality of student learning. Common rubrics will be needed to summarize levels of student achievement across different academic fields and institutions and for particular groups of students.

But here again, much progress has been made. The National Assessment of Educational Progress grades student achievement in four levels: advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic. On each of the five outcomes that we propose as the heart of college-level learning, these four levels can be described in concrete terms and in enough detail that they can be reliably scored. Faculty members responsible for milestone and capstone assessments can be trained to judge the level of each student's achievement on each of the five expected liberal education outcomes and on their accomplishment in their chosen fields.

A summary report to an accreditation body, a state official, or the general public can be prepared that aggregates the data across the institution. Because it may include results from many students major-

ing in different disciplines, a summary report can include examples to illustrate the larger meaning of its results.

Like standardized testing, this method will allow for summarizing the outcomes of student learning with a few scores. But unlike tests based on quick responses to multiple-choice questions, these will be summaries of higher-order skills such as communication, analytic ability, and integration of knowledge, and will reflect meaningful educational projects judged by professionals.

Also, when the data are available, each campus can take steps to engage faculty and students in interpreting the meaning and implications of assessment outcomes.

Faculty members should use the findings as a basis for discussion and a catalyst for needed changes in the academic programs. ■

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Greater Expectations

A New Vision for Learning in the 21st Century

Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College, the 2002 report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), describes liberal education outcomes that are important for all college students, whatever their field of specialization or socioeconomic circumstances. The recommended outcomes, which weave together both academic and employer expectations for student accomplishment, call for students to develop analytical and practical skills, ethical and social responsibility, as well as deep understanding of the social and natural worlds, and ways of gaining knowledge about them. Building from earlier AAC&U reports, the recommended outcomes also address the importance of engaging diversity at home and abroad in achieving a liberal education.

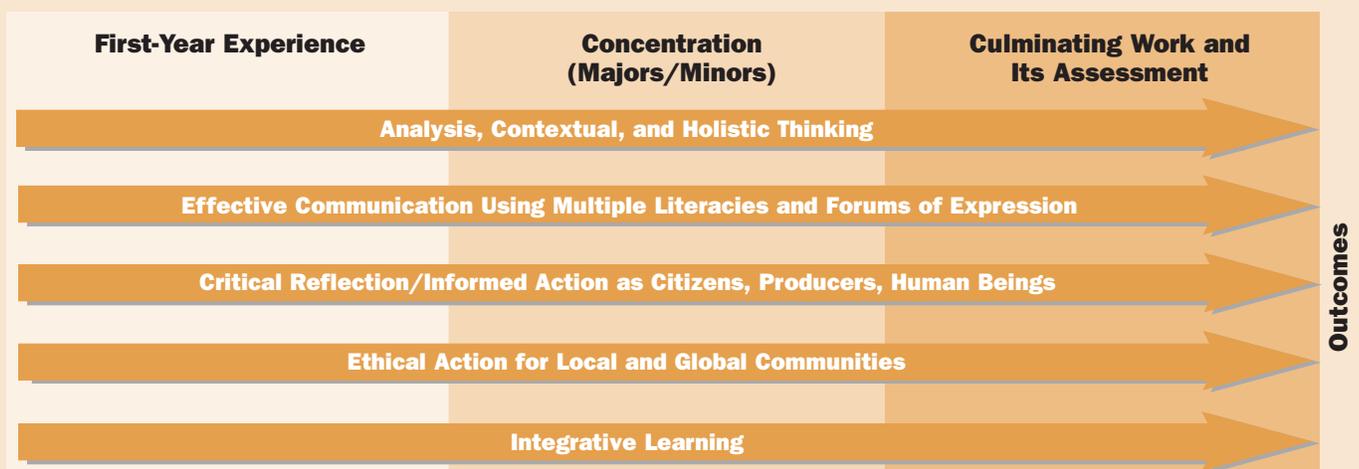
The *Greater Expectations* report proposes six major changes in the ethos and practice of liberal education:

- A new national commitment to provide an excellent liberal education to all college students, not just those who can attend elite institutions, and not just those studying traditional arts and sciences disciplines.
- An end to the “artificial distinctions” the academy has established over time between liberal arts and preprofessional education. Liberal education in all fields, the report contends, should become both intellectual and practical. When connected to significant questions in the larger society, a “practical liberal education” will prepare students simultaneously for participation in a dynamic economy, civic engagement in a contested world, and meaningful lives.

- An inclusive commitment to liberal education that will require new collaborations with the schools to ensure that students address the recommended liberal education outcomes from school through college, at progressively more challenging levels.
- Purposeful new connections between general education and major programs. Learning outcomes should be transparently addressed throughout the educational experience, and assessed in the context of students’ advanced work both in general education and in majors.
- A new emphasis on shaping advanced and culminating programs in the degree-granting institution, given the reality that nearly 60 percent of college graduates now attend two or more institutions while pursuing a degree. Such culminating work would provide students with the opportunity both to strengthen and to demonstrate their achievement of expected outcomes.
- The creation of a “culture of evidence” about the level and quality of student accomplishment in liberal education.

Because these proposals imply far-reaching change both within the academy and in higher education’s relation to school preparation, *Greater Expectations* also calls for the creation of a “New Academy” that models a more intentional educational environment for learning, and easier but more educationally purposeful passage from one academic institution to another. This “New Academy,” the report points out, is already discernible in pacesetting educational innovations that can readily be found at all kinds of universities, colleges and community colleges. The time is ripe to both scale up and connect educational innovations that campuses already support and value.

Connecting Learning Across the Curriculum



What's in a Name?

The Persistence of “General Education”

By **Stephen H. Bowen**, senior fellow, Association of American Colleges and Universities

Essentially every contemporary American college and university requires that undergraduate students complete a common “general education” curriculum, regardless of the student’s major or area of specialization. In the words of one regional accrediting body, this is “a coherent general education requirement consistent with the institution’s mission and designed to ensure breadth of knowledge and to promote intellectual inquiry” (North Central Association 1997).

Comprising about 25 to 50 percent of the academic credits required for a baccalaureate degree, this coursework and the learning it is intended to produce help to distinguish graduates as baccalaureate-educated persons as the institution defines that concept.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, curricula taught at American colleges and universities began to diversify through addition of a requirement in each student’s program of study for a major area of concentration. This was sometimes titled “special education.” The title “general education” came into wide use early in the twentieth century to identify that part of the curriculum that was not the major (Kimball 1995). The meaning of this title became sig-

nificantly more specific as a result of the work of the Harvard Committee on General Education. Published in 1945, *General Education for a Free Society* set out specific goals in the education of every student to be addressed in a shared, coherent, purposeful general education curriculum. The committee proposed a combination of required core and elective distribution courses, with instruction in writing embedded in the curriculum. Today, most general education programs at colleges and universities across the nation contain these elements.

Conceptions of general education were further developed and defined through the extensive reform efforts of the 1980s and 1990s, which resulted in greater aspirations and substantially increased enthusiasm for the potential and importance of general education. Colleges and universities better articulated their commitment to breadth with integration and purpose with coherence throughout the common curriculum. Many institutions developed pedagogies, content, and structures that were distinctive of their goals and identity.

Although the term “general education” referred to a widely understood distinction when it first came into use, many in the academy today believe this label does not

effectively communicate either the purposes and goals of their current curriculum or their aspirations for this part of the educational program. What are some of the alternative titles, and what might each imply? Does one or more of the alternatives better communicate our aspirations for this facet of the undergraduate experience than does “general education”? If so, why does this name persist to such an extent?

Rob Mauldin, director of general education at Shawnee State University in Ohio, informally surveyed the variety of titles given to general education curricula at 200 colleges and universities. He found that although 67 percent use the descriptor “general,” other titles are also in wide use. The term “core” was used by 20 percent, “university” by 8 percent, and “liberal” by 7 percent.*

We academics are careful about our words. Each alternative has something different to say about the purpose of this segment of the educational program, and different audiences are likely to interpret the labels differently. An important factor in the success of any curriculum is communicating its purpose to students, so it matters which we choose. What are the implications of these commonly used labels, and how well do they communicate what we mean?

* These add up to 102 percent because some curriculum titles include more than one of these words.

Although “general” is the most widely used, it is also the least informative. Apart from “not specific,” and thus not focused in a single area of study, the term is vague and may be assumed by some to indicate a lack of intentionality. Others will make the association with the common use of “general” to connote introductory-level material—as in “general biology”—and may conclude that the “general education” curriculum is preliminary to specialization in the major. The name “general education” has a practical advantage; it is the term most widely used in higher education, including by accrediting bodies, journals, and government agencies. Also, as the most readily recognized name, “general education” helps to accurately identify the variety of curricula intended to play similar roles at American colleges and universities.

Many will appreciate the fact that “core,” the second most common descriptor, implies the centrality of this part of the undergraduate experience in terms of structure, function, and goals. But like “general,” “core” does not clearly indicate the content or goals of the curriculum. In addition, the term is of limited use to the many institutions where this curriculum consists of broad menus of elective courses without actual core courses—although there may be a set of core goals.

“University” has the advantage of signifying that this curriculum belongs to the university as a whole and is, to some extent, common to the degrees of all students. This may be a subtlety to those less familiar with curricular structures, however. If it is not a university curriculum, they may wonder, then what is it?

“Liberal,” as in “liberal arts” or “liberal studies,” has the greatest potential for com-

municating what is intended to those familiar with academe, and the greatest potential for miscommunicating to those who are not. Those in academe are likely to recognize that the majority of general education programs are grounded in the liberal arts values of breadth and integration of knowledge and in the development of fundamental intellectual skills. But those unfamiliar with the liberal arts tradition may mistake “liberal” as a political stance. Those who interpret the liberal arts tradition to lay audiences often feel obliged to clarify this point.

Thus, none of the commonly used words meets the criteria we would expect for an effective name. Although one or another may better reflect the intent of the curriculum, they tell us little about the curriculum that helps to distinguish its structure, function, or goals from other elements of an institution’s educational plan. It may as well be named “Fred.”

At a few colleges and universities, the curriculum in question has been given a name that more precisely signifies its purpose: “Critical Foundations in the Arts & Sciences,” “The Common Learning Agenda,” “The Global Village Curriculum,” or “The International Core Program and Basic Competency Requirement.” These names have the advantage of drawing attention to distinctive features of the institutions’ educational programs. Moreover, a few colleges and universities have taken the definitive step of naming the curriculum after the institution, making it a signature element of institutional identity: “The Marshall Plan,” “The Miami Plan,” “The Kalamazoo Plan,” “The Tulsa Curriculum,” or “The Ursuline Studies Program.” These institutions have made a special commit-

ment to shared learning that is distinctive.

If the names in common use are not particularly informative and “general education” is the least among them, then why does this name persist as that most commonly used? Three possibilities come to mind. One is that, when compared to other matters, this issue does not rise to a level of importance that compels action. In the context of other concerns, the name of the common curriculum and what it signifies is not a pressing issue. A second possibility is that, even though it is important to many that the program be well named, there is inadequate consensus about what the name should be. This may reflect some variety of opinion about the priorities and goals that guide the program, and coming to consensus does take time. A third possibility is that, despite the best efforts of reformers and their ambitious curricular plans as written, the reality is that, once implemented, the general education curriculum remains mostly general. Of the three possibilities, this one has the greatest consequences for the quality of students’ educations.

Whatever the reason, dissatisfaction with both the generic title “general education” and the equally tepid alternatives to it may help to stimulate examination of what actually is being accomplished in your program, thus providing a valuable reality check. ■

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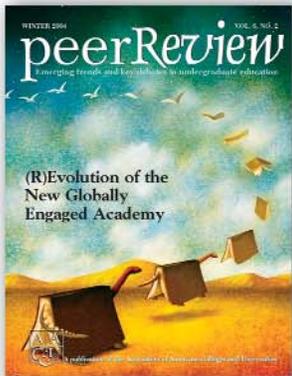
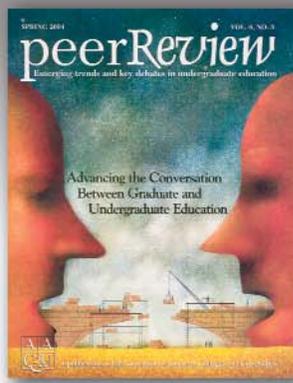
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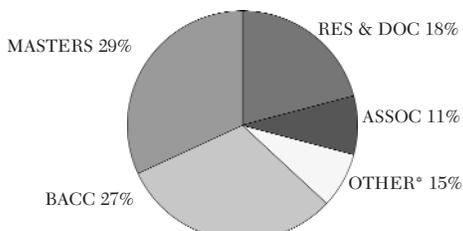
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AAC&U is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Since its founding in 1915, AAC&U's membership has grown to more than 975 accredited public and private colleges and universities of every type and size.

AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Its mission is to reinforce the collective commitment to liberal education at both the national and local levels and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges.

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