Preface

One of the familiar “Arkansas Traveler” episodes describes a tourist asking a farmer across the fence whether he has lived on the farm all his life. The farmer responds, “not yet.” That homely but wise rejoinder may point to the recovery in our time of a view of education first articulated by Socrates, that effective teaching intends not the “filling of a vessel” but the “kindling of a flame.” Learning is the calling of a lifetime and a legacy passed on to future generations.

In American higher education, we have for more than a century assigned a major portion of this noble incendiary mission to what we call “general” education. We now make that claim with increasing confidence. Programs informed by vague assumptions about the importance of “breadth” have given way to programs reflecting far higher and more clearly expressed aspirations. At the College of William & Mary, the aim of general education is “to help students develop critical judgment, imagination, and moral autonomy.” Southern Methodist University seeks to educate students “as worthy human beings and as citizens, first, and as teachers, lawyers, ministers, research scientists, businessmen, engineers, and so on, second.” Oklahoma State University seeks to provide its students with “general knowledge, skills and attitudes conducive to lifelong learning in a complex society.” And Loyola University Maryland “challenges” its students “to develop their interests, intellects, outlooks, beliefs, and values.”

Strong programs begin with impressive goals. But there is also evidence that what general education programs accomplish for students often falls short of institutional aspirations. Responding to concerns about this gap, the academy has moved to define expectations more clearly and to frame strategies for assessing their accomplishment. The publication in 1994 of the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Strong Foundations: Twelve Principles for Effective General Education Programs offered an influential overview of this movement. The book described twelve principles that effective general education programs embody, and, by so doing, offered a rubric against which programs might be measured and through which programs might be improved.

What has happened since 1994 prompts a fresh perspective. In little more than fifteen years, a clear and detailed statement regarding liberal learning outcomes has emerged, and the role of general education in contributing to such outcomes has become more clearly understood. Assessment, prompted initially by external expectations
of greater accountability, has become a key tool in programmatic improvement. An epochal paradigm shift from focusing on what is taught to focusing on what is learned can be observed in course syllabi, in statements of departmental outcomes, in revised accreditation standards, in criteria for the evaluation of faculty, and in textbooks. Technology has challenged practice and supported improvement. And the necessity that all the disciplines contribute to the offering of a liberal education to all students has become an ever more widely shared assumption.

Supported and prompted by the progress on these broad fronts within the academy, many institutions have since 1994 taken up the challenge of general education reform and, to a far greater extent than in the past, many have succeeded in achieving genuine progress. As a result, there has developed an instructive community of praxis complementing and in many instances advancing our understanding.

In sum, higher education has become—and continues to become—more intentional with respect to the ends and means of general education and more strategic in its pursuit of those ends through innovative means. In the tradition of Strong Foundations, this fresh overview seeks both to celebrate that progress and, in so doing, to further it.

—Paul L. Gaston