

Introduction

At the end of the 1970s, leaders of American higher education turned their attention to the improvement of undergraduate general education thanks to three signal events: the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1977) declared general education “a disaster area”; Ernest Boyer, the U.S. commissioner of education, and his assistant Martin Kaplan (1977) called for a focus on social needs and suggested a common core curriculum as a means to secure nothing less than “survival”; and the Task Force on the Core Curriculum at Harvard College (1978) recommended a core curriculum for students at that influential university. Colleges and universities across the country soon had their faculties discussing improvements in general education—and the conversations continue to this day.

An influential article arising from this era was “Avoiding the Potholes: Strategies for Reforming General Education” (Gaff 1980). It summarized the lessons learned about the process of curricular change by fourteen diverse colleges and universities participating in the Project on General Education Models sponsored by the Society for Values in Higher Education. Over the years, this article has been found useful by faculty members and academic administrators throughout higher education as they have reviewed and strengthened general education curricula.

Since 1991, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has conducted an annual, weeklong institute for faculty and administrators from campuses seeking to assess and improve the general education of their students. Originally called the Asheville Institute on General Education because of its initial site, the University of North Carolina at Asheville, more recently it has moved among several different campuses. Each institute has invited teams from twenty to thirty institutions, and each team has been provided with copies of books and articles about general education, including “the potholes paper,” as it has come to be known. In recent years, the institute staff observed that the article’s content was still very relevant but that it needed to be updated. In May 2006 Paul Gaston, a staff member at the institute, volunteered to take the lead in a revision if Jerry Gaff would work with him. Thus began the collaboration that has led to this revised and expanded publication.

The purposes of this new publication are (1) to identify problems, herein called “potholes,” often encountered by campus curricular review and revision groups; (2) to describe some ill-fated consequences of seemingly commonsense strategies or procedures adopted by curricular review groups; and (3) to suggest alternative approaches. The purpose is not to provide a ready-made roadmap of the curricular change process, but rather to stimulate thinking among campus leaders so that they can devise the most effective strategies for

their own circumstances. And because drivers may sometimes find a brief trip guide useful as a handy supplement to the travelogue, you will find a quick summary of our positive recommendations in appendix A.

The Changing Environment for General Education

By the late 1970s, general education had come to be taken for granted and consisted of a variety of courses in the liberal arts and sciences disciplines so as to provide students with a broad education. But educators were growing concerned that mere breadth was an insufficient requirement for an educated person, and they searched for a more robust view of general education. It soon became clear that it admitted of no single or simple definition. A heuristic definition was offered by the Task Group on General Education (1988, 1) led by the late Joseph Katz: general education is “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.” This definition avoided advocacy of any particular content and invited individuals into a conversation to determine the most essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes for students to acquire. Although breadth of knowledge was still important, this definition raised the sights of those who discussed general education. Soon many colleges and universities were hard at work discussing the importance of general education for their students and devising ways to strengthen their current programs.

Even as concerns over undergraduate general education were beginning to claim the public attention, several important paths to reform were beginning to converge. First, increased expectations for institutional accountability, experiments with “performance funding,” and concerns regarding institutional identity and competitiveness prompted a growing recognition: general education represents not merely a platform for study in the major, but a critical contributor to and determinant of an institution’s overall educational effectiveness. A second path lay in the emerging awareness among employers that individuals presenting the benefits of an effective general education were likely to prove more adaptable to change, more inclined to efficient and cooperative work within groups, more appreciative of diversity, and better prepared to learn on the job (AAC&U 2008, 10–14). As Marvin Suomi, president and CEO of the Kajima Corporation, said at a conference sponsored by Elmhurst College, “today, perhaps more than ever, we need the depth of perspective that a liberal arts education can bring to decision-making, product development, leadership, and other dimensions of business” (Council of Independent Colleges 2003, 12). Finally, increasing competition among colleges and universities for talented students has provided an impetus for promoting strong general education programs as a competitive, marketable advantage. As these paths have come together, many institutions have sought to examine, improve, and assess their general education programs.

Success has hardly been universal, however. For every exemplary program implemented, there have been several institutions that, after weighing ambitious reform plans,