Realizing General Education: Reconsidering Conceptions and Renewing Practice

CYNTHIA A. WELLS
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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Contextual Significance of General Education in Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Education’s Interconnection With Higher Education’s Purpose</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Education and the Current Context</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Education: Many Meanings, Multiple Functions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose and Organization of Monograph</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History Matters: Tracing the Development of General Education</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundations (1636–1783)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additions and Tensions (1784–1869)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrialization and Mediation (1870–1939)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid Growth and New Expectations (1940–1976)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overgrowth and Struggle (1977–2005)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Reflections and Insights</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Perspectives and Models</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inherited Functions</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Models of General Education</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Insights</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive Summary

General education is frequently heralded as distinctive to U.S. higher education. Colleges and universities tout the value of a general education in their mission statements and catalogues. The importance placed on a general education in the context of U.S. higher education bears out in that approximately one third of the typically 120 credits for the bachelor’s degree in the United States consist of general education requirements (Lattuca & Stark, 2014). General education also has a long and contested history; moreover, it has experienced multiple periods of renewal over the course of that history (Boyer & Levine, 1981; Trowbridge, 1958). Greater comprehension of this muddled history and its imprint on varied philosophical and programmatic ideals in the present are vital to realizing the aims of general education.

Our Varied Conceptions of General Education

In spite of seeming reverence for general education, there is little consensus as to what we actually mean by general education. Some argue that general education is about introducing specific subjects, whereas others point out that college graduates should share certain fundamental skills. Still another viewpoint is that essential texts are requisite to a general education. Differing perspectives not only make it challenging to consider the significance of general education but also open it up to a wide range of determinations regarding its effectiveness.
Beyond disagreement, general education is both resisted and resented in the current context. Questions are frequently raised about the point of general education, particularly but not exclusively among parents and students. General education is often considered something to “get out of the way” rather than a worthy end in and of itself or even a means to enriching the experience of earning the undergraduate degree.

General education is also implicated in much of the broader criticism facing higher education. Critique revolves around the lack of attention to questions of meaning (Kronman, 2007). General education is at the center of critique regarding the quality of student learning (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Donoghue, 2008; Keeling & Hersh, 2012). Concerns have also been voiced about fragmentation within the educational experience as well as disconnect between the academy and the societal context (Taylor, 2010). Revitalizing general education is often positioned as a means to addressing these concerns.

Our conceptions of and aspirations for general education are consequential in advancing the effective preparation of college and university graduates in the twenty-first century. General education raises important queries of individual and social significance and influences how we respond to appeals for accountability, including the affordability and value of higher education.

This monograph is grounded in the premise that general education indeed matters but that divergent and largely implicit conceptions limit our ability to effectively navigate general education. While achieving consensus on the ideals of a general education is too lofty a goal, disentangling the divergent conceptions that hinder renewal and advancing a broader frame for comprehension are vital steps toward realizing the aims of a general education.

My contention is that general education represents a way of framing the notion that there is something valuable about an education that empowers individuals and gets at something larger than any single academic discipline. This conception is intentionally expansive, reflecting the fact that general education involves a variety of outcomes that can be achieved in different contexts and through a number of educational strategies. General education prescribes particular lenses for curriculum and educational practice while simultaneously encompassing a wide number of ideals, models, and programs.
Various conceptions of general education evolved over the course of the complex history of higher education in the United States. This monograph surveys this history, emphasizing the connection between general education and broader social and educational dynamics. By understanding the wide range of ideals espoused for general education and how they emerged over the past three hundred years, educational leaders will be better prepared to navigate the complexity of the present.

Our complex history has bequeathed a wide variety of functions for general education, which can be categorized broadly as student learning, societal well-being, and institutional outcomes. Further, general education is achieved through a wide variety of curricular models. The most prominent theoretical models are core, distribution, and competency, but these prototypes have spawned a variety of adaptations. Recent renewal efforts and related initiatives have focused on general education as a venue for advancing educational integration and fulfilling essential learning outcomes (American Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015).

Renewing General Education Practice

Effective general education requires a network of interconnected strategies. Curriculum design, educator development, and assessment initiatives must interweave in order to fulfill the aims of general education in a particular college or university. A sense of coherence is advanced by intentional alignment between program design, social context, and institutional mission.

General education must reflect institutional mission. General education should be designed around each institution’s purpose, educational aims, the culture of its faculty, and the specific character of its students (Gaston & Gaff, 2009; Handstet, 2012; Rountree, Tolbert, & Zerwas, 2010). Any general education program that is implemented on a particular campus without being carefully aligned with the institution’s mission and educational objectives will likely fail to achieve its intended aims.

Advancing general education today is not limited to the so-called general education curriculum but extends to how general education outcomes are achieved in the major disciplines as well as in cocurricular contexts.
Moreover, a variety of programmatic elements may serve as structural elements within a general education program; the literature illustrates that common text programs, a common curriculum, electronic portfolios, learning communities, and capstone experiences have been used in some contexts to advance general education aims. While the elements necessarily vary, the point is to think broadly about what programmatic structures potentially contribute to the aims of a general education program while also remaining faithful to the mission and culture of a particular institution.

Across institutional contexts, the aims of general education must be attended to within and beyond the structures for enhancing learning. General education course design and faculty development must intentionally align. It is also crucial that faculty rewards systems align with the aims of general education. Cocurricular educators must be equipped to advance general education learning outcomes in out-of-class contexts.

Communicating a shared general education mission and related student learning outcomes to all constituencies, including students, parents, faculty, cocurricular educators, administrative leaders and board members is widely championed (Allen, 2006; Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009; Ewell, 2004). Communication and shared vision are indeed critical. However, general education faces unique challenges in meeting these expectations given the divergent assumptions that surround general education. This is particularly complicated by the shadows cast by these various ideals in the current context of heightened accountability and concern regarding the value of a college education.

Accountability for student learning is a driving force behind much of general education renewal in the current context (Allen, 2006; Bastedo, 2011; Ewell, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Moreover, attention to assessment in general education specifically has proliferated (Allen, 2006; Banta, 2007; Ewell, 2004; Finley, 2012; Hanson & Mohn, 2011). Assessment in general education is an expectation of each of the regional accrediting bodies. General education assessment ensures that all academic and cocurricular departments understand how they contribute to the student learning outcomes attributed to general education (Bresciani, 2007). The assessment of general education is an avenue to greater clarity of purpose and ultimately achievement of intended outcomes.