
This report summarizes and recommends general education reforms, with advice on implementations. It is most useful to administrators and faculty who wish to reform general education at their institutions without adding to the roadkill resulting from most such reform attempts. The authors take up current status quo practices from a nationwide sample; those practices are inventoried, deplored, and mined for insights. The authors present readers a formidable case for reform. They then inventory contemporary reform efforts (with some notes on external funding). The writers offer strong recommendations regarding several areas (not all detailed in this review), including giving general education administrators teeth, coping with transfer issues, providing civic education, using distance education technologies wisely, and mastering assessment. Would-be reformers will end their reading not only informed about the status quo and reform efforts in general education but armed for debate and with reasons for caution.

The report in hard copy is an uptown production: large-format pages (so the page count might mislead one regarding the reading time or chapter lengths), a slim package on heavy stock, ready to be handed around in meetings on campus and capable of returning intact with sticky notes and marginalia. The report is generally well edited, with very few typos and only occasional brief outbreaks of speaking in tongues, Bureaucratese or Policywonk. There are several compensating short sections that are eloquent, with strong and quotable lines, and some summaries of masterful terseness. Don’t wait for the movie. The book is organized in digestible chunks, with an executive summary, a prologue giving national and historical context, ten chapters (called sections), a section (not called a section)
reviewing recommendations, useful endnotes, and three appendixes including tabular summaries of general education requirements at many institutions. The online .pdf file gives links from the table of contents to sections and appendixes. The package, either online or hard copy, is easy to use.

In this review I emphasize sections broadly applicable to those working on ambitious general education initiatives rather than on modifications. Then I will look at what’s missing and at some implications that could add to the report’s recommendations and help reformers.

The contextualizing prologue will help strengthen the resolve of reformers. Higher education is facing a great many serious challenges, but one of the main ones is the challenge to its own adequacy. That challenge is not about the fairly recent fad of offering majors but, instead, is about the loss of a coherent center to the bachelor’s degree. Not that providing a center will be easy. The report summarizes several factors leading to this problem, including

—students’ and parents’ (and legislators’) myopic focus on jobs preparation in ignorance of accelerating changes in career demands and the needs for general literacy and thinking skills,
— a consumer model emphasizing choices, and
—a difficulty of achieving consensus on what a core would include if we resist turning that core into a rationale for white patriarchy.

Section 3, “Structure and Culture of the Academic Disciplines,” and section 4, “Integrating General Education into the Fabric of the University,” fit together, though it is not obvious at first, as analysis of a problem and a look at some solutions. Section 3 provides an analysis of, among other things, the extent to which organizing academe around departments contributes to difficulties for strengthening general education. The buzzword is silos, though surely that word will have buzzed off into oblivion or back into management lit by the time this review sees print, as soon as someone thinks harder about silage. Departmental structure is foundational, not just within universities. It is built into budgeting, influences catalogs of book publishers and journals, organizes conferences and want ads, and provides a home and a primary locus for decisions. General education participation is often a choice made by consenting departments as an added and optional activity, and it is clearly a second choice to maintaining the major when things get rough.

Section 4, on integrating general education into the fabric of universities, begins by commenting on and endorsing the current move on many campuses to appoint the moral equivalent of a vice provost or dean with primary portfolio the administration of general education. The authors warn that such positions
need to be undiluted by dishwashing or by taking over other duties from merging positions. The report claims that the existence of these positions is one of the most crucial steps toward integrating general education into universities. The writers note that the practice of fitting the positions into already existing structures, so as to minimize incursions into others’ turfs, has led to reductions in incumbents’ power and added ambiguity regarding their functions. The tendency to load other miscellaneous functions onto their plate reduces their ability to address big-picture needs for innovation and reform. Further, they often do not have authority to implement changes on their own and so have to spend much of their time consulting, negotiating, and persuading others whose interests in maintaining turfs make change difficult. Their budgets (with mentioned exceptions of the University of California, Los Angeles [UCLA], and, for a while, the University of California, Berkeley) are usually not stable or flexible but, rather, have to be continually renegotiated and so are subject to reduction, merging, and elimination in lean times. This means that their power is reduced and their relationships with others, even if nominally at the same administrative level, may deteriorate from those of peers to relations of beggars to almsgivers. The UCLA budget is crucial to its office being a model of success in making general education a full citizen of the university, though since the report came out, UCLA has substantially weakened its lower-division seminar general education requirement. Further, the fact that undergraduate education officers do not have the same leverage with faculty as department chairs do is often a severe constraint in recruiting faculty for general education initiatives. Monitoring and evaluation in general education are often less emphasized than departmental offerings in the majors, which means that quality may slip further before it draws attention.

Campuses should, on this account, implement or reexamine and restructure their positions of chiefs of undergraduate education with an eye toward making those positions powerfully able to incorporate general education into the rest of the university. Such chiefs must be given parity with the other deans and vice provosts, with stability of budget, with reserves sufficient to provide funding for innovations and faculty incentives, and with authority to make structural changes (in consultation with faculty senate education policies committees) in their own divisions. Advising for all students should be provided by those who understand the value and the central role of general education. Implementing just this last recommendation may involve revoking laws of momentum and inertia.

The report’s recommendation to put in place a general education czar who can swing serious weight at the central table will be an appealing one. Implementing the change involves navigational hazards. It is not clear that this
recommendation will, in fact, fix the problems for which it is designed. Recent history suggests that setting up such a position probably will not make up for a lack of will on the part of the president or the provost, since campuses with such positions still provide support in the case for reform. Any halfhearted implementation will have the effect of opening a new box in the administrative structure into which the blame for failures of general education can be funneled, with the by-product of putting a sudden end to the promising administrative careers of the incumbents.

Among the other issues to be addressed in any general education reform, one important set centers around balancing choice with commonality. Can we provide a core to the degree while acquainting students with the possible existence of substantial and legitimate studies outside their majors? These problems are notoriously not solved by allowing students to graze through smorgasbords of individual courses or pairs of courses, even if we require that they pick up at least one salad and one [fill in entries from your own triad or pyramid or tetrahedron here] along the way to the cashier. Such general education programs easily make provincialism worse by misleading students into thinking they understand other disciplines based on token samples involving no research and little writing. The implication that a taste of art history or of philosophy or of biology will round out a student’s education further trivializes studies outside the major and adds to the difficulties of making general education a central core of a degree. The smorgasbord approach becomes part of the problem, contributing lack of respect for general education. This report recommends moving more general education requirements into upper-division work within substantial clusters or minors and naming them in the degree. (Minor roughly means the equivalent of a half year’s full-time work either within a discipline or on a set of issues addressed in an approved interdisciplinary package.) Three such minors separate from each student’s major would be a formidable remedy for intellectual provincialism. This seems to me an important and doable recommendation, though its adoption and implementation will certainly test the will of would-be reformers and their presidents.

Now, what remains undone in this report? While bachelor’s degrees that provide such combinations of depth and breadth would be a huge step toward remediating provincialism, this would not yet give graduates a common store of knowledge. There are several ways to address this problem. Or, of course, we can continue the current standard practice of staying in denial.

The first way is something the report mentions but does not spend much time on, though, e.g., the University of Washington’s new course on a comparative history of ideas (Appendix C, p. 68) may incorporate a gesture toward it. Some colleges and a few universities, and honors colleges within other universities,
require something like a Great Books series, sometimes making up most of the
degree but usually severely attenuated (see Lindenberger’s [1990] account of the
fate of a list of fifteen works at Stanford, a cautionary tale about academics on all
sides being unable to think when their politics are threatened). Notable institu-
tions under this heading are St. John’s, Columbia University, and the Univer-
sity of Chicago, especially during the eras of Hutchins, Adler, and van Doren.
More than two dozen more institutions and parts of institutions require such
programs. Implementations vary. David Denby’s (1996) account of his return to
Columbia to retake that year-long sequence points out how mistaken it is to take
such programs as expressions of any culture’s values. This is because the programs
include powerful attacks against those values, and not just from Voltaire, Marx,
Veblen, or Sartre—Plato’s *Euthyphro* can be read as an attack on ethics as a search
for a theory or code, and Plato provides devastating attacks on Platonism as
well. St. John’s requires the Eastern classics, with their undermining of assumed
dichotomies. Sokal’s attack on cultural studies is often now another text within
the discipline. The stakes involved in Wittgenstein’s rethinking of Cartesian dual-
ism are only now being made clear in the social sciences. A less controversial way
of formulating this approach might be as a two-year-long course series addressing
the intellectual history of the world, with the goal of acquainting students with
the best ideas human beings have had.

So, perhaps there are not several ways but only one. If we really need to
disagree, we can argue over how much to water the soup.

The report does mention the problem of “eroded consensus” regarding
such things as our shared heritage, which would make putting together a list
of central works difficult. As soon as a group decides to include challenges to
consensus and to look around the world as part of the study, however, the job
becomes easier. The group can also agree that faculty members are allowed a
couple of friends under the velvet rope. The standard framework of main divi-
sions into sciences, social sciences, and humanities, even though some universi-
ties want to work with finer-grained distinctions, apparently remains secure.
That framework can help with design of the course series and help as well when
it is time to resist signing on the dotted line to buy the entire 137-author Adler
and van Doren (1972) reading list or some other dotted line for another fad,
e.g., of enlightenment through metaphor or cognitive science or systems theory.
Such an intellectual history of the world focusing on the best (including the sub-
versive) ideas humans have had would be, when combined with requiring three
minors outside one’s major, a second powerful antiprovincialism measure.

Apparently hundreds of millions of dollars of foundation money and
millions of hours in faculty time have been poured into the problem of making
general education more adequate. Results so far are inconclusive and are not
much. No one’s happy yet. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has declared victory and pulled out. The prognosis is not good.

The Center for Studies in Higher Education has documented very well the need for comprehensive and deep reforms of general education. The issues raised here also help reestablish perspective in the field of higher education. Compared with the problem of giving a coherent core to the bachelor’s degree, the furor over outcomes assessment and accountability initiatives looks like a footnote to Veblen (see 1918). Issues about presidential compensation are much less a big deal than are these problems those presidents should have solved.

The search for instances of achieved reforms to help lead the way is less successful. With this study as background, however, the main structures are becoming visible for those who have the will to make general education a coherent core of higher education. Such a general education program will be central to the degree, not susceptible to being pushed off the bench by majors. It will include a series of courses acquainting all students with an intellectual history of the best ideas, including the most formidable challenges, human beings have had. It will include substantive minors outside the major. It will be guided by a leader with administrative clout.

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References