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## An Innovative General Education Program

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# An Innovative General Education Program

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In a recent survey of 110 graduating Seidman School of Business students, only 28% reported that they found it useful to take business courses outside their major and 21% said it was useful to take courses outside the business school. Eighty percent said that the applicability of any course to future jobs is one of the most important factors when they choose their courses. These perceptions, coupled with other results from the survey, indicate that our business school students have a very utilitarian approach towards education; i.e., they see their years at GVSU primarily as an avenue to earn a credential that will eventually secure them a job. I think it is fair to state that most of our professional students resent having to take general education courses and view such requirements as a hindrance to the important task of completing the business curriculum.

That's a shame, because students are making three fundamental mistakes when they approach their education in this way. First, they are confusing an educated person with a vocationally trained person. Second, they are failing to recognize that their lives will be comprised of much more than a job and that being a broadly educated person brings richness to all parts of one's life. Finally, they are assuming that employers value only the things they learn in their professional courses.

It used to be that almost all university education was general education; an educated person was defined as one who had acquired knowledge across a number of areas, understood how knowledge was accumulated and used across societies and civilizations, and was capable of meaningful thought and reflection. As jobs changed and the need for specialists grew, especially during the sixties and seventies, general education requirements began to shrink as the role of professional education expanded. In the last decade, intense debate about university graduates' lack of general knowledge, critical thinking ability, and analytical skills has prompted a reexamination of the curriculum. General Education is currently undergoing a revival as a reemphasis is emerging around the importance of traditional university values.

In contrast to many other public universities, Grand Valley State University has always maintained that liberal and general education is at the heart of its identity. The university's new mission and values statement renews our commitment to the centrality of a broad liberal education and continues to emphasize that a complete education involves more than preparation for a particular career. A career occurs in the context of a life, and a sound general education helps one "make a life" as well as "make a living." The University therefore remains committed to assuring that all undergraduate students, regardless of

academic major or intended profession, receive a broad education rooted in the arts and sciences.

I believe Grand Valley's General Education Program is the most well-articulated, comprehensive and structured general education curriculum found in any public university in Michigan. The faculty put enormous thought and effort into its design and implementation; the administration gives it a central place in our curriculum and allocates resources to ensure its success.

The focus of our General Education Program is to provide students with an education that balances depth with breadth, the specialized with the general. The General Education Program helps students become literate in a sophisticated way in a number of disciplines, and it fosters their ability to make connections across various domains of knowledge. This preparation will provide students with the general knowledge and skills necessary to participate intelligently in the discourses that shape local, national, professional, and global communities.

When the faculty redesigned the General Education Program six years ago, we asked ourselves what roles educated people should fill in their societies and their professions, what knowledge and skills they need, and what kind of general education program would provide them the opportunity to live a thoughtful life.

Through the requirements of our General Education Program, we attempt to educate students in the following areas:

*1. An educated person understands the major areas of human investigation and accomplishment — the arts, the humanities, the mathematical sciences, the natural sciences, and the social sciences.* The basis of a university education is manifested in the ability to understand a variety of disciplinary perspectives, their respective contribution to the growth of human knowledge, and the various approaches through which knowledge is generated, tested, and used.

*2. An educated person possesses knowledge of his/her own culture and the cultures of others.* He/she is able to comprehend and respond constructively to the world's diversity, a diversity manifested not only in ideas and ways of knowing but also in populations and cultures. As citizens of the United States, students should be familiar with our pluralistic heritage. As citizens of the world, students should be knowledgeable about cultures and perspectives different from their own.

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3. An educated person is familiar with the tradition of humane inquiry that informs moral and ethical choices. He/she is able to identify the values that shape one's choices, assess the consequences of those choices, and understand alternate value perspectives. This enables informed choices in light of ethical, moral, and practical concerns.

4. *An educated person is able to engage in articulate expression through effective writing and speaking.* Such a person has mastered the various forms of written and oral communication that permit full participation in a society and world dependent on the free interchange of ideas and information.

5. *An educated person can think both critically and creatively.* Expressiveness, imagination, and originality are needed for innovation. Innovative ideas must be subjected to critical evaluation, which involves distinguishing information, judgment, and assumption; evaluating evidence and the logic of arguments; identifying and assessing differing perspectives and assumptions; and reasoning systematically in support of arguments.

6. *An educated person can locate, evaluate, and use information effectively.* He/she is able to locate, gather, assess, and process information from a variety of sources, and evaluate and use that information as the basis of informed judgments and intelligent decisions.

7. *An educated person is able to integrate different areas of knowledge and view ideas from multiple perspectives.* He/she can articulate and synthesize facts, basic concepts, and disparate knowledge into a coherent and meaningful whole. Making sense of a variety of data and experiences allows one to address human concerns in a broader way than can be accomplished through any one discipline.

Grand Valley strives to educate students in these areas of knowledge and to develop the skills discussed above through its General Education Program. These are, incidentally, knowledge and skills business employers have always indicated they value. Like many universities, we have general education requirements in the arts and humanities, the social sciences, the mathematical sciences, and the natural sciences. We also require that students learn about United States culture and the cultures of other parts of the world.

What makes the GVSU General Education Program fairly unique among large public universities is the thematic requirement, whereby students take upper-level courses from three different disciplines all addressing a specific issue or idea. Preparing for responsible participation in public discourse requires that people become conscious of both complementary and competing viewpoints and recognize that any issue or problem can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Let us assume, for instance, that a company is considering outsourcing some of its labor abroad. Of course, the profit implications

of this decision are important. But there are also psychological, sociological, ethical, political, environmental, and cultural considerations involved in the decision. I would argue that the company is much better served by the broadly educated person who can perceive multiple viewpoints and speak to more than the business perspective.

Seidman's business curriculum is dedicated to making sure that our students, via their academic majors, become competent specialists in their fields of endeavor. An equally pressing priority is that our graduates also possess the marks of a generally educated person — that they will have acquired the broad knowledge and life skills that will allow them to be informed and thoughtful people. These ideals co-exist within Grand Valley, and together they produce people who can contribute to their own well-being, their communities, their professions, and the world in which they live.