

1994

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Recommended Citation

Falvey, Chris (1994) "Why We Keep Making a General Education that Nobody Likes, or, Why Can't We All Get Along?," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol10/iss1/6>

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WHY WE KEEP MAKING A GENERAL EDUCATION THAT NOBODY LIKES, OR, WHY CAN'T WE ALL GET ALONG?

Chris Falvey

Well, why do we? Why can't we? General education programs are political turf, the battle lines being drawn between several camps. Most notable are the Professional Program People (PPPs) vs. the Liberal Arts Types (LATs), the Smorgasbord Lovers (SLs) vs. the Core Curriculum Connoisseur (CCCs), the Canon Protectors (CPs) vs. the Multicultural Advocates (MAs). Here are some of the conflicts that ensue:

1. The PPPs fear that the LATs will swamp their professional program major requirements with endless requirements in history, science, the arts, and so forth. Furthermore the PPPs don't see why what they do can't be considered general education. Why isn't the History of Social Work or Chemistry for Nurses as good for general education as other history or science courses?
2. The LATs, for their part, distrust the PPPs. LATs believe that what they do is *real* liberal education and that PPPs are too narrowly focused, either in their own graduate training or in their current commitments or both, to be capable of either doing or desiring to do "real" liberal education.
3. The CPs see a study of the classic core works of western civilization as the only hope of retaining the common cultural values that will keep us from degenerating into Bosnia-like dissent.
4. Conversely, the MAs believe recognizing and studying diversity, otherness, gender, racism, etc. as the best solution to the same bloody potential.
5. The SLs say, why not let students choose? And anyway, core curriculums are boring and stifling to both students and faculty. It means we have to keep teaching the same old stuff over and over, whereas that "stuff" could be taught many different ways and we'd all be the happier for it.
6. The CCCs believe that having a college education should mean that all graduates have a common body of knowledge and the only way to assure this is to make them all take the same courses.

Why we keep designing general education programs that nobody likes is because we *don't* get along. We are too diverse in our ideas about what makes for a good education, too diverse in our commitments to the liberal arts or to professional study, to canons or

cultures, to disciplines or integration. And it is about time, I think, that we admit this unpleasant fact. We are never going to come to agreement. In some cases, diversity of opinion leads to a healthy middle ground where the extremes are eliminated and represented in modified form through a negotiated solution. This does not seem to be the case with general education programs. Instead they end up being weak compromises and unsatisfying to all.

The most serious weakness in our general education program is that the courses in it get to count for *everything*. Courses that professional program students need as cognates and prerequisites to their majors count in general education. Many general education courses are "used" as part of many liberal arts majors. As long as this continues to be the case we do not really have a general education program/curriculum. Instead what we have is what we've got: a Byzantine design where whatever the student has to do anyway (for the major, for the BA, etc.) gets repackaged and called the student's general education program. Enough!

I suggest that the only way out of this mess is to uncouple general education from all other requirements. Specifically, what I propose is that what a student can take, what "counts," in general education cannot count anywhere else.

If a professional program person has read this far, she is gnashing her teeth by now. But wait! Of course there has to be compromise. What I'm suggesting is that we compromise over numbers, over who gets how much, and hold the line on the integrity of the general education curriculum itself. Release the general education curriculum from serving too many masters in exchange for making it a smaller curriculum. By carving out an inviolable space for general education the fights over whether it should be canon-ish or multicultural, diverse or tight, can go on amongst the folks who are committed to teaching general education. As it is now those battles are meaningless because they are swamped by the larger problem of general education's being parasitized to serve the needs of major programs. If we cut down on the number of general education courses which are required, that would keep general education, even in this no-double-counting form, from encroaching too much on major program requirements.

Here I don't mean to propose exactly what that new program would look like, but let me work out an example. Suppose we made something like this the requirement: students have to take two general education courses in the sciences, two in the social sciences, and three in arts and humanities. Furthermore, we might consider exempting students from having to take any general education courses from the division of their major. It might go something like this: a psychology student takes the two science courses and the three arts/humanities courses and has no social science general education requirement. Good enough but the real problem is with the profession program students. Here each program would have to decide what liberal arts discipline it was most aligned with. For example, Nursing might say the sciences. This would mean that nursing students would have to take the three courses in the arts and humanities and two in the social sciences; and these courses could not count for *anything* else. If nursing students need

introductory psychology as a prerequisite for something else in their program, well...the Nursing program can require that on its own. As for the nursing students not being required, *via general education*, to take science, perhaps this will be a loss; but I think not. The nursing faculty will see to it that their students are required to take science. While this may not result in the students getting quite as broad, as "liberal artish," a picture of the sciences, I trust that people who are learning and practicing an applied science profession will end up with a good general understanding of what the sciences are about, their methodologies, and limitations.

Let's do some numbers, again using nursing as an example. A typical nursing student would take two "skills" courses (composition and mathematics), two general education social science and three general education arts/humanities courses. That is *only seven courses*. All the rest of the students' course time could be used up in whatever way the nursing program saw fit. Students might be required by their program to take introductory chemistry, biology, and psychology (for examples) as prerequisites to their nursing courses. But with only approximately 23 credits "used up" by general education, surely there is plenty of room left (97 credits) for nursing students to get all they need of basic science and social science cognates, as well as their nursing major courses. And, whatever it is that they need would be up to the nursing program. Just as general education is freed from having to serve too many masters, so the professional program has more freedom to be designed as the professionals see fit.

Why do this? The goal it would achieve is exactly the goal of what general education is about: to make the student's education more GENERAL. If in the opinion of their faculties, nursing or social work or criminal justice or any other, students need, say, introductory psychology, then this is because the faculties see introductory psychology as part of the students' professional background. The problem of how to require (make) students take this course should not be solved by the general education curriculum design. It should not be solved, that is, by figuring out (as we've done) how to "stick" these background cognates into the general education requirements.

Because we've allowed general education to serve too many purposes, there is no real possibility of true innovation. The ideological battles over core curriculum, the canon, and cultural diversity become side skirmishes that amount to little. There is no space, no room, for these issues to be worked on in a meaningful way. For example, suppose in our present program we designed and offered some jewel of a two course sequence in social science general education. Offered as a choice, it would be swamped, overwhelmed by the fact that for most students introductory psychology (and probably social problems) would be, in effect, the course(s) they would have to choose. The wonderful two course sequence would always be no more than a clever little experiment, experienced by a tiny minority of students. Meanwhile, the general education program, decorated with this little jewel, would lumber on in its present deformed form. All the wrangling and anguish of the faculty who hammered out the two course sequence wouldn't amount to much in the end because the general education curriculum would, for all practical purposes, continue to be what it was before the sequence was introduced.

But if it were freed from the constraints of having to serve too many purposes, the general education curriculum could evolve in fruitful ways. Perhaps we would design a core curriculum in the sciences, social sciences, and the arts/humanities. Perhaps we would have a variety of courses students could choose from. Perhaps we would create interdisciplinary courses. While the designers were making their design, their goal would be to create courses for *non-majors*. The social science faculty, for instance, would be free to think "What should students who are *not* majors in the social science (nor in the allied professional disciplines) get from a study of the social sciences?" Psychology majors or social work majors would have the benefit of taking general education science and arts/humanities courses that were designed with the parallel question in mind about those areas.

So this is my proposal: make the general education requirements smaller in exchange for freeing the program to be exactly what, and *only* what, it is supposed to be about. When we ask a general education program to do too much, it does it poorly. Protect general education courses from being used as part of the major, and the major's cognates and prerequisites. Then we can get down to the business of meaningful dialogue about what general education should be at Grand Valley, down to the work of creating a program that is, in real and practical terms, worth the effort that goes into it.