

1990

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Dewey Hoytenga
Grand Valley State University

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Recommended Citation

Hoytenga, Dewey (1990) "General Education and Philosophy at GVSU," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 13.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol6/iss1/13>

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General Education and Philosophy at GVSU

DEWEY HOITENGA

Last August the fourth freshman class entered Grand Valley under the new General Education Program. It would seem rather early, therefore, to raise some more than minor questions about the program. Four years, however, have perhaps given us sufficient experience and distance from the establishment of the program to warrant consideration of some possible changes. I have decided, at any rate, that it is not too early for us to begin discussing the program and hope what follows will be a start in that direction.

I write to express two concerns: how the program looks as a whole, and what has happened in it to my own subject, philosophy. I hope others will join the discussion, either responding to these concerns or raising some of their own.

The Program as a Whole

As some of my colleagues who developed the program will recall from my discussions with them at the time, I wondered right from the start about the four major categories into which the program is divided: the College Section, the Arts and Humanities, the Natural Sciences, and the Social Sciences. It is even clearer to me now than it was then that these categories taken as a whole invite confusion and misunderstanding. The trouble stems from there being no consistent principle by which the course requirements are organized under them. As I hope to show, the College Section is the chief offender.

What do I mean by a consistent principle? I mean a single, evident *idea* by which the courses students are required to take are divided into major classifications or what I have just referred to as *categories*. I think there are only a very few such principles available. At one point in *The Closing of the American Mind*, Alan Bloom briefly reviews three such ideas (342-347). Whatever you may think of Bloom's book in general or his proposal for general education in particular, you will perhaps agree that his three principles are about the only plausible ideas available for organizing a program in general education. Each of them, at any rate, if strictly adhered to, can be used by itself to secure a coherent set of course requirements.

On the first principle, a student would be required to study the basic ideas, methods and knowledge in the generally recognized divisions of the modern American university: the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. "The reigning ideology here is *breadth* The courses here are almost always the already existing introductory courses" (342). This approach not only requires breadth, it also manifests simplicity. Every major field of learning has its introduc-

tory course; every student who studies every major field of learning at its introductory baccalaureate level acquires the basic knowledge taught in the modern university.

As a few of us faculty and administrators remember with some excitement and nostalgia, this was the approach Grand Valley followed in its "Foundation Program" during the early years of its existence. Every student entering as a freshman had to take 9 courses (3 per term on a quarter system): Introduction to English, The Classical World (history), Introduction to Philosophy, Problems of Modern American Society (political science), Introduction to College Mathematics, Foundations of Life (biology), Frontiers of Science (physics and chemistry), and two terms of a foreign language. To this Foundation Program was added a distribution requirement in the fields of learning outside the student's major, to be met during subsequent years. The Foundation Program made for a lively intellectual community: every student knew what every other student was studying, and every professor could assume that all the students taking further courses in his or her own field had been prepared in the same basic way. But the simplicity of those days, with its common fund of basic ideas among students and faculty alike, like every Golden Age, is no doubt gone forever.

On the second principle (following Bloom), the student would be required to pursue a number of "composite courses" which are usually, but not necessarily, produced by a "collaboration of professors drawn from several departments." Bloom illustrates: "These courses have titles like 'Man in Nature,' 'War and Moral Responsibility,' 'The Arts and Creativity,' 'Culture and the Individual.'" What is the value of such courses? Bloom states it nicely: "They have the clear advantage of requiring some reflection on the general needs of students and force specialized professors to broaden their perspectives, at least for a moment" (343). In other words, they provide a remedy for the disconnectedness between the fields of learning which generally attends the first approach.

Such interdisciplinary courses do not offer the only way to accomplish this, however. Bloom's third (and his own preferred) approach, that of studying the Great Books, will also serve. For nearly every one of the Great Books stretches beyond the limits of a specialized discipline, as a glance at any list of them will reveal. That is because, as Bloom puts it, they ask and attempt to answer one or more of the "big questions." In his *Liberal Education* Mark Van Doren (for an earlier generation) put the point as follows: "Textbooks neatly cut and stuff" the subject matter, but Great Books are "bursting with content, and a content with which no other can compare. . . . The Great Books are all different, yet their humanity makes them all one" (152; 157). What is the value of this approach? The Great Books offer a remedy for the chief unhappy tendency of the "composite course" approach, which is (in Bloom's words) "trendiness, mere popularization, and lack of substantive rigor" (343).

Look, now, at Grand Valley's current General Education Program. Its four main

categories fly in the face of a consistent principle of organization. While three of them, Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences, offer a recognizable attempt to require study in the major fields of learning, the “College Section” seems to be a miscellaneous catch-all, inviting both overlap with and expropriation from the other three. And that is largely just what turns out to have happened. One of its subdivisions (Group C) is the History of Western Civilization, a group that the College Section has taken from Humanities, where history is generally located; another is Logical and Mathematical Quantitative Reasoning (Group A), in which most of the courses (mathematics) are taken from Natural Sciences, but one (logic) is taken from Humanities.

That leaves two other subdivisions: Foreign Culture and Multicultural Approaches (Group B) and Critical Examination of Values and Ideas (Group D). Here, at last, given the scope of the headings, we might expect to find, perhaps, the “composite courses” of Bloom’s second main approach. Some of the courses listed under these two groups may genuinely be interdisciplinary, but my guess is that most are not. I can vouch only for “War in the Nuclear Age,” since I teach in it, that it is both interdisciplinary and team taught (which seems to be the only proper way for an interdisciplinary course to be taught these days, given the extreme specialization of most of us who teach in the modern university). If I am correct that many of the courses in Groups B and D are not really interdisciplinary, let alone team taught, why are they there?

The courses in Group B (Foreign Culture and Multicultural Approaches) are there to provide an understanding and appreciation of the diversity of human cultures. That is a current and important concern. Indeed, we are this very year even more tuned in to the importance of multiculturalism than four years ago when the program was established. Perhaps, therefore, this theme needs a group of courses all by itself to see that something definite, conspicuous, and responsible is done. Still, why put such a group of courses in a category called the “College Section”? The label suggests that all the groups under the Arts and Humanities, the Social Sciences, and the Natural Sciences categories have something other or less than “college” status, which of course is erroneous. Furthermore, we do not even have a college anywhere in the university anymore, so what does the label mean?

And what is supposed to be taught under the Critical Examination of Values and Major Ideas (Group D)? Many of the courses in Group D focus upon ethics, either directly or indirectly; but “Einstein’s Universe” quite clearly does not. Does this course, then, together with one or two others, teach a “major idea”? If so, there are precious few “major ideas” identified as such that the General Education Program requires students to study. But, of course, students are not even *required* to study such a major idea, since they can satisfy the Group D requirement by studying one of the courses in ethics. Conversely, they are not required to study ethics, since they can satisfy the requirement by completing “Einstein’s Universe.”

In fact, there are many courses in the other three main categories that also teach

“major ideas,” so that here again we have a (partial) heading under the College Section which either overlaps with other groups in the other categories or expropriates courses from them (such as “Einstein’s Universe,” from Physical Sciences, Group A under Natural Sciences). Why are there no courses in Group D from the arts? Why none from literature? Are these areas without values and major ideas? The suggestion is ludicrous; yet that is just what labeling one group in the College Section “Critical Examination of Values and Ideas” suggests. So what, then, is the organizing principle of Group D that distinguishes it from Groups A, B, and C in the College Section, and from the various groups in the three other main categories?

Philosophy

There are more anomalies, but I have said enough to show both the large and small scale confusion that permeates the General Education requirements. Such confusion is bound to have its unhappy consequences for various fields of learning.

One conspicuous example of this is philosophy. Where is philosophy in all these groups and categories? The answer is obvious: philosophy has been given no group that recognizes it as a major discipline in its own right. In contrast, history and literature, its fellow subjects in the humanities, each determine a group of courses, as does every other major subject from the physical sciences to the fine arts. This fact suggests that philosophy has no subject matter sufficiently distinct and important to warrant requiring students to study it in the university’s General Education Program (and, therefore, requiring the university to teach it in that program).

Where then *is* philosophy in the program? Here and there—that is all that can be said. The Philosophy Department remembers well how difficult it was to make a case to get some of its courses into the groups at all. In order to get “Introduction to Philosophy” included, the department had to argue that philosophy is an “exploration of literature,” which of course it isn’t. In order to get “Logic” in, the department had to argue that logic is the study of mathematical reasoning, which is only half true, since logic analyzes the mathematical formalities of reasoning only in order to understand and evaluate arguments, which have content (yes, “values and ideas”!) and are expressed in language. So logic requires equally a study of *language*, in a crucial way that none of the other courses in Group A in the College Section does; it is, therefore, one of the *humanities*, not to be lined up with mathematics). Again, “Aesthetics” got into Arts and Humanities Group A because it has something to do with art, not because it is itself an “introduction to art” or to one of the arts, which it isn’t. These three philosophy courses, therefore, made it into their present groups not on their real merits, but only because of sophistic arguments the department (which teaches its logic students to avoid such arguments) had to make on their behalf.

Where the department needed no such arguments, but where there was an obvious case for its history of philosophy courses to be included in the College Section,

History (Group C), the department was turned down. To this day there has been no satisfactory explanation given for including three courses in the history of science in this group but none in the history of philosophy.

The only philosophy course that found a home with ease—in Group D of the College Section—is “Ethics.” No surprise. The surprise came when “Ethics in the Professions,” submitted for the same group, was rejected. Only after continued argument (and assistance from the professional schools) was “Ethics in the Professions” finally accepted, two years after the program was originally adopted.

So, philosophy is in the General Education Program, but all carved up, as if it has no coherent subject matter or disciplinary integrity of its own. It managed to get into the General Education requirements here and there, by fair arguments or (mostly) foul, and then only as a conspicuously minor partner in every group to which it was admitted. Rather than itself dominating one group (in the way every other group except Groups B and D in the College Section is dominated by a recognizable area of learning) and having courses from other areas knock on *its* door, philosophy is the outsider, the oddity, that had to stand at all kinds of other doors and beg. The net result is easy to see: a student can meet the General Education requirements, and therefore graduate, without having taken a single course in philosophy.

Does that result reveal what Grand Valley currently thinks of philosophy? If so, the corollary, which I hinted at earlier, is not far behind; if students don't really need it, the university ought not to have to hire teachers to teach it. I don't believe, however, that this is what the university really thinks. It is certainly not what its founding administration and original faculty thought. And that is because philosophy *has* a subject matter of its own, distinct from that of every other field of learning. Philosophy pursues the nature of ultimate reality (metaphysics); the nature, kinds, and limits of human knowledge (epistemology); the nature and basis of good and evil, right and wrong (ethics); the principles and techniques of correct classification, definition, and reasoning (logic); and the nature and function of art in human society, as well as of aesthetic experience in the lives of individual human beings (aesthetics). While other disciplines naturally have occasion to raise questions on these matters, and perhaps sometimes to examine the answers seriously, most of the time these disciplines must, quite understandably, pursue their own subject matter. This means that they must make relatively unexplored, perhaps even uncritical assumptions about all these matters. Philosophy is the only discipline that pursues them directly, critically, and persistently and whose teachers have been trained to do just that and only that.

Why, then, has philosophy fallen into the cracks? Not because what it studies is unimportant. What could be more important than every day to examine (with the help of Socrates and all the philosophers he has inspired for the last 2400 years) the question: what brings virtue and happiness to human life and society? Or to examine whether Carl Sagan is really right when he dogmatically announces that “the

cosmos is all there is”? These are questions of great importance, on which every human being, it seems to me, really wants the light of reason to shine. If philosophy is devoted 100% to that goal, it can only have been some momentary inadvertence that has brought about its sorry place in our General Education Program. But sorry it is, as I hope I have shown. And that is the second reason why I think we should begin discussing improvements that could be made in the program.

What to do?

To help get that discussion going, let me offer what seems to be the simplest way of remedying the most obvious defects I have pointed out. Two steps are easy to take. First, move the Mathematics Group and the History Group back to their homes in the Natural Sciences and the Arts and Humanities. Second, provide philosophy a home in the Arts and Humanities where it belongs, to which it can gather its scattered children in a group of its own.

A third step, just as important as the first two, is nearly as easy. It requires retaining a separate major category for two remaining groups that, in my judgment, ought to be kept: multicultural and interdisciplinary courses. But neither one of these groups represents a recognizable field of learning within the other three categories. For the courses now included in the Multicultural Group are drawn from both Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences. And composite courses, such as “War in the Nuclear Age,” by definition do not fit into any of the groups under the other three categories. Yet I believe we ought to keep them, encourage faculty from different departments to create them and team teach in them, and require students to take at least one such course as part of their general education. For then students can learn firsthand from scholars who make a significant effort to relate their own specialized disciplines to other disciplines in a way that addresses human concerns in a broader way than can be done by any one of the disciplines alone. Indeed, I suspect that the need for such courses as a remedy for the specialization and disconnectedness that tend to characterize the traditional type of general education program was precisely one of the reasons why the developers of the current General Education Program created the “College Section” in the first place. So I propose keeping this important idea as a requirement and making it more explicit by naming a group of courses: “Interdisciplinary Studies.”

But into what larger category, then, do we place these two special groups, Multicultural Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies? I would not want to call it “The College Section,” for reasons I have already mentioned. Why not call it the category of “Integrative Studies”? Although strictly speaking, this term is not coordinate with the other three categories, it would clearly identify the purpose of this fourth category. Its purpose would be to do something that can’t be done well by courses in the other three, traditional categories, viz., address significant integrative aspects of human life and learning. Courses in Multicultural Studies would foster an understanding and

appreciation of our cultural diversity; courses in Interdisciplinary Studies would foster an understanding of other areas of broadly human concern which are not adequately understood by the knowledge of one academic discipline alone. Redefining and relabelling the College Section in this way would go far to head off the confusion and misunderstanding it now invites.

Taking these steps would have two consequences. One consequence would be the elimination of Group D, Critical Examination of Values and Major Ideas. But that would only be to eliminate an ill-defined, catch-all group which currently suggests, quite mistakenly, that it contains the only courses in the General Education Program that critically examine values and major ideas. The second consequence would be the addition of one group to the total number of requirements in the program. That is a quite different matter, of course, and should be decided solely on its merits—which really means on the individual merits of each of the groups in the entire program.

If the future repeats the past, the time will come when the General Education Program will again be the center of our attention. The better prepared we are for that time, the better the revised program will be. So let me repeat my earlier invitation to my colleagues to join a new discussion of Grand Valley's General Education Program. There are probably some informal discussions going on already; it would be good to hear what is being said. Especially, of course, I would like to learn what others think of the issues I have raised.

Works Cited

Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

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