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What is Good about Our GEP—What is Problematic: A Response to the Timeliness of Hoitenga's Proposal

Stephen C. Rowe

Having served as the chair of the General Education Subcommittee for the past three years, my view of the General Education Program perhaps provides a counterpoint to that of Dewey Hoitenga. His focus is on the design or conceptualization of the program, while mine of late has been primarily on the everyday detail of the procedures and forms and meetings of the program. Yet I think our views are finally complementary, and we agree that the time is right for some changes. In order to make this clear I need to review what has been happening in recent years.

I became a member of the Gen Ed Subcommittee and its chair in 1987, the first year of implementing the new program. The understanding in the committee at that time was that we would resist the temptation to “tinker,” that we would take the new program as we received it from the previous committee that designed it and seek to implement. While acknowledging that there were problems in the design due to certain of its “political” aspects, we bracketed these problems and set about the project of seeing if we could make it work. Our hope was that we could thereby refine and purify the program from the bottom up. (As a philosopher, my concern was not so much with the representation of my discipline as a part, as with enabling the whole program to achieve philosophical adequacy.)

It went pretty well, and I am convinced that we made real and significant progress. But this advance might be hard to see, since it has occurred primarily in collegiality and pedagogy rather than in terms of abstract design.

Very early on we came to the agreement that what was most important in developing the program was collegial process, the establishment of a live and ongoing deliberation. This, we decided, was the best source out of which right decisions might emerge with respect to choice of courses for the categories and even articulation and reform of the categories themselves. We initiated an evaluative process in which good reasons could prevail and find implementation in meeting each other as colleagues, fellow teachers and learners within a shared educational undertaking rather than as administrators or competitors.

At the same time we affirmed certain essential values in the way of learning that should characterize the actual relations between teachers, students, and materials within the program. Bracketing issues of overall design, we were concerned with the concrete dynamics of the classroom, particular courses, and the undergraduate

program as some kind of learning community. We sought to affirm that general education should reflect our

... commitment not only to the broad distribution of studies that is necessary to the bachelor's degree, but also our commitment to liberal education. That is to say, we are concerned not only with subject matter, but also with the method of instruction. We aim for general education courses to be oriented to liberal education, as something greater than mere coverage of material, in the following senses: that as many classes as possible are small enough to permit and encourage discussion, writing and related methods that enable learning to occur at a level deeper than that of simple memorization of material for tests; that whenever possible there is integration among courses and movement toward appreciation of the general ideas and values that are characteristic of the liberally educated person; and that instruction occurs within a context of continuous discussion of the sort that builds and sustains a learning community. ("Evaluation of the General Education Program," 1/14/89, subsequently approved by UAS)

I want to emphasize the significance of these developments and commitments, ones that might be invisible from outside the committee proceedings or from a purely conceptual orientation to Gen Ed. Speaking now as a teacher and scholar rather than as a committee member, what I value most about Grand Valley is this institutional commitment to liberal education, not so much as intellectual consent to some particular position but as the way we actually relate to students and each other. At GVSU we have the institutional arrangements and commitments by which we can be engaged in real education rather than mere processing of students. At other places the imperatives of number (FTE) drive away from seriousness about general education on every count mentioned in the quote above; institutional realities that are inherently at odds with learning community gradually, and without any explicit discussion or decision, leech the liberal education out of general education. The distinctiveness of our approach, the cost of which is largely born by faculty commitment, cannot be overemphasized—especially among public institutions. What is most persuasive about GVSU is that here we have the adventure of pursuing liberal education among the public (an adventure that is far more persuasive in our recruiting efforts than any "released time" or "research opportunities" we could offer—let us not fool ourselves in our current enthusiasm for a published faculty).

And yet. Turning now to the Hoitenga proposal and the structure of the Gen Ed Program through which we are able to maintain and practice our distinctiveness, there are problems. Parallel with the committee's efforts to develop the more process-oriented goals that I have discussed, we have lived, since receiving the program from the committee of design, with a nagging problem of conceptualization or design. Without departing from our initial agreement against tinkering, we

have attempted to find and articulate the coherence of the program. We have sought to compose “intermediate language” for the categories that would be easily understood by students and advisors, “operational language” that would be understood by us in the act of evaluating, and even “ordinary language” that would be understood by the public at large.

This has not gone terribly well, and it is my judgment that the parallelism can no longer be maintained: that we are now at a point of convergence between the very positive process developments and the difficulty with identifying and articulating the overall design of the program.

Hoitenga is right in what he says about the conceptualization side of the program. There is confusion as to the meaning of the program, its coherence, its adherence as one whole thing with some parts in happy relation to its unity. It is time for the brackets to come off; we need to trust the integrity of what we are doing, and that we can remove brackets without courting chaos.

And I also think that Hoitenga’s particular proposal is worth considering. In fact, I would even add a suggestion to what he is proposing: under the “integrative” category, don’t we need a third subcategory or core course, something that enables our students to appreciate and appropriate the fullness of what a college education can be? Students need an introduction to the very ongoing conversation about “liberal education” and its relation to becoming a civilized human being that is the source of our own best efforts.

But one thing troubles me in the endorsement of Hoitenga’s proposal. Though I know and trust Hoitenga’s sensitivity to the process developments I have indicated, opening the door to reconceptualization makes me think of babies and baths. It is all too easy to criticize Gen Ed from afar; in a world of self-interest and least common denominator, our program is a very frail thing. And in a world of materialism and technical reason it is easier still to not see our progress on the process side. My hope is that we can now reconsider coherence of design without ripping up the threads of community that have been formed at considerable effort, and without being so consumed with abstraction that we overlook the obvious facts of what we do well.

Thus I welcome the Hoitenga proposal and encourage others to respond also. But I conclude by reminding them that design is not all there is to the program, that it exists and has a growing integrity in the classroom and in various contexts of collegial deliberation (in the committee itself and in the various evaluation groups for the categories). It is neither necessary nor is it smart at this point to tear this all up. I welcome Hoitenga and others to a quite lively and fruitful conversation.