



*Association
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Colleges and
Universities*

General Education ESSENTIALS

A Guide for College Faculty

Paul Hanstedt

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Foreword

As a twenty-five-year-plus faculty member, it was a pleasure to read *General Education Essentials*; I wish I had such a resource when I began my university teaching career. Of course I had been an undergraduate student, so I knew what general education was, what a major meant, electives, and so forth, but I had no idea that there actually were concepts and theories that underlay and justified general education as an important, integral part of a quality undergraduate education. I thought that general education was a set of courses students were required to take so we would be exposed to all the areas traditionally associated with being a well-rounded, educated person. Therefore, as a faculty member I simply had to teach my introductory course as I always did; students could take the course and learn about the basics of American government and be much better persons as a result. Little did I know at the time.

Paul Hanstedt has a deft touch in crafting this book on general education—that too-often least-valued part of an undergraduate education. Before students enter college they are told in a variety of ways that general education is something to “get out the way” as soon as possible in order to get on to the really important part of their education—the major. Hanstedt, though, manages to bring to bear the latest research on the purposes and impact of general education for student learning and a whole set of practical examples and approaches to teaching general education classes that, together, hold the potential to improve faculty pedagogy and students' undergraduate experience. As a long-time faculty member with both domestic and international teaching experience in large and small

colleges, Hanstedt draws upon his experience in multiple environments for his insights into reformulating general education. As a literature and writing professor, he brings an ease with language and an ability to describe and portray general education as a living and breathing integral part of the preparation of students for success in a complex world of change; a world that also requires our approach to and representation of general education to change as well.

As the author points out early in this book, change in what we mean by general education has happened: “Indeed, the rate of change is such that some would argue the main title of this book is inaccurate: it's not ‘general’ education we're after anymore, a term many associate with ‘breadth’ and that evolves from Enlightenment and Victorian era ideas about what makes a person cultured. These days, more often than not, the term of choice is *liberal education*, indicating not a left-leaning slant to scholarly thinking but a sense of what it means to create liberated human beings—people who are independent and flexible in their thinking and capable of responding to the demands of a changing world in civic-minded, deliberative ways.” The need for change has become an alarm for many.

At a time when numerous reports from academics and the media are calling for change because U.S. students are not performing at the same levels as students in other parts of the world, especially in several Asian countries, many of those same countries are looking to the U.S. system of higher education as the answer to the shortcomings in their own graduates as identified by the business leaders in their own countries. Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea are all introducing general education into their baccalaureate degree programs because they believe that general education provides U.S.-educated students with the creative and integrative skills their own students lack—skills essential to be competitive in a rapidly changing world

economy that demands more versatile and innovative abilities than they are finding among their own country's college graduates.

Not only does this book present a cogent argument for the central role general education plays in an undergraduate's education; it also deconstructs what this more sophisticated and useful conception of liberal education means for faculty who are engaged in teaching the courses that comprise general education programs across the country. It is still the case that preparation of new faculty in graduate programs usually contains nothing about general education, liberal education, or the critical role they can and need to play in a student's higher education. Nothing prepares new faculty to understand what it means to teach a course included in the general education program and how it needs to be different from a course that primarily serves as an introduction to a content area. Nor is there anything in graduate preparation of faculty to suggest that general education courses shouldn't be only introductory courses. Advanced courses, including capstone courses, can be and need to be part of a general education program if students are to develop the skills and abilities necessary for success.

In this concise guide for college faculty, readers will encounter a cogent argument for a contemporary liberal education—the big picture—followed by an examination of the courses that often comprise the curriculum of general education, and finally a look at the critical importance of the assignment in achieving the purposes of a reconceived program. A third to a quarter of most undergraduate curricula is composed of general education requirements, yet to hear my faculty colleagues discuss general education, its primary role is to expose students to the breadth of knowledge associated with the well-rounded, educated person. This is an outdated and unexamined notion that ignores both the fact that today's students have no problem

having access and exposure to an incredibly broad array of knowledge and content, and the recognition that having students take a collection of mostly introductory courses does little to enhance a student's educational understanding of important disciplines, traditions, and intercultural or civic understanding beyond being able to answer television game show questions.

In Part Two, the author moves beyond the theoretical and conceptual basis for liberal education and provides strategies and a rationale for designing courses and building intentional programs of study within a general education program. General education is a program of study not unlike disciplinary or interdisciplinary majors. The author argues that general education deserves the same attention and consideration as any organized field of study. Indeed, general education does much of the heavy lifting in grounding and building the essential learning outcomes that both faculty and employers have firmly concluded are necessary for student success as citizens and employees.¹ To illustrate the arguments for an intentional approach to general education, the author provides examples of colleges and universities that have been successfully establishing coherent general education programs.

In Part Three, the author turns his attention to two of the book's most important components of powerful general education programs—assignments and assessment. Research on student learning and pedagogy has concluded that a significant reason students often do not demonstrate learning around particular topics or issues is because they were not clearly asked to demonstrate the desired learning. In other words, the assignment was not constructed in such a way that it asked for demonstration of the learning being expected by the instructor. Teaching and learning centers across the country have been stressing to faculty the

importance of developing clear and focused assignments for many years.

Coupled with the reconsideration of assignments to enhance learning, the emergence of new approaches to assessment have begun to reinforce the usefulness of assessments that can provide evidence of student learning, or its lack, that faculty members can actually use to improve their classroom pedagogy and effectiveness. Assessment no longer needs to be something that is imposed from the outside for accountability reporting, but is becoming a valuable teaching resource for enhancing student learning and faculty success. Campus-level evidence is emerging of the positive usefulness and impact of good assessment.²

General Education Essentials does what previous books on general education have not been able to do. This book manages to provide a compelling theoretical framework for the principles and practices of liberal education necessary for college graduates in the twenty-first century; to connect the theory to examples of faculty-led implementation on different types of campuses; and to do so in a style and manner that is readable and useful for the typical faculty member who may have limited exposure to or interest in general education. Full-time and part-time faculty in any discipline and at any size campus with any type of mission can pick up this volume and learn something that will help her or him improve teaching and learning. If an entire campus embraced the contents of this book, their general education program could be transformed and the performance of their students enhanced.

I wish I had had this book when I was starting my own teaching career. I would have been a better teacher, and my students would have been better prepared for life after college.

Terrel L. Rhodes

Vice President for Curriculum, Quality, and Assessment

Association of American Colleges and Universities

[1](#) *College Learning for the New Global Century*. 2007. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

[2](#) "Assessing Liberal Education Outcomes Through VALUE Rubrics." *Peer Review*. Fall/Winter 2012. Association of American Colleges and Universities.

About the Author

Paul Hanstedt is Professor of English at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia. During his tenure there as director of general education, he led his campus in a successful curricular revision that resulted in a theme-based general education program featuring writing, quantitative reasoning, and oral communications across the curriculum. The corecipient of a half-million-dollar grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education for sustainable faculty development, Hanstedt also received a Fulbright to spend a year in Hong Kong as part of a team supporting the universities there as they designed and implemented general education programs. In addition to his work in curricular, course, and faculty development, he is an active writer of fiction and nonfiction, recently publishing *Hong Konged*, a memoir of his year in Asia with his three children under the age of ten.

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I also acknowledge the support of Roanoke College, my home institution, particularly its wise and patient president, Mike Maxey. In addition I owe a great deal to various faculty and administrators, past and present, for their support: John Day, Michael Hakkenberg, Richard Smith, Adrienne Bloss, Susan Kirby, Sabine O'Hara, Katherine Hoffman, Gail Steehler, Chris Lee, Robert Schultz, Wendy Larson-Harris, Chris Buchholz, and many, many others, without whom my understanding of general education would be greatly diminished. Thanks also go to Dan Johnson of Washington and Lee University, whose wisdom in the field of psychology was invaluable to me throughout this project.

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I conclude by pointing to four scholars and writers whose work has influenced my own efforts in the classroom, on the page, and in workshops. Pretty much any time I discuss matters of course design, I am thinking about the work of Barbara Tewksbury, whose approach to course design is a model of common sense; in addition, James Zull, whose book *The Art of Changing the Brain* helped me understand the biological basis for learning; James Bean, whose *Engaging Ideas* has become a bible for all who are interested in writing- and thinking-across-the-curriculum; and Jerry Gaff, whose “Avoiding the Potholes: Strategies for Reforming General Education” has influenced everyone working with curricular reform in liberal education for the past thirty years. Anyone interested in making sense of an academy overwhelmed by changing expectations, tightening budgets, and myriad social and political forces intent on reshaping the university will find comfort, insight, and clarity in the work of these four scholars.

Finally, my love and thanks to Ellen and the kids for being kind and reminding me of what matters.

Introduction

Perhaps it's best to begin by stating the obvious: today's faculty are busier than ever before. In the past few decades, research and publication expectations at universities at most B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.-granting institutions have gone up. Teaching loads, by contrast, have not gone down. Indeed, with tighter budgets, chances are that faculty will see more students, not fewer, in their classrooms. And with new initiatives ranging from assessment to diversity to green campuses, the degree to which faculty are expected to serve on departmental and university committees, advise students, and perform other forms of service has generally risen.

In addition, lately academia seems to be taking its cues from corporate America and embracing paradigm shift at a dizzying rate. Every year it seems that the administration comes to the faculty with a new catchphrase, an altered mission focus, a new five-year plan. It's not uncommon for faculty facing an institutional discussion of "curricular change," "curricular revision," "core development," "general education," "liberal education," or "integrative learning" to find themselves groaning inwardly and thinking, *Oh, no. Here we go again.*

Or maybe not. Maybe some of us—graduates of liberal arts institutions perhaps, or those in a field that embraces interdisciplinarity, or maybe just those who are broadly curious—have a different response. These folks may remember with fondness the startling realization they had in a required class outside their intended major, or the spark of connection they experienced when they understood that what was happening in the mathematics class and the philosophy class were not so very different.

In the end, it probably doesn't matter how we respond, intellectually or emotionally, to the possibility of curricular change because chances are, it's going to happen. Every year the American Association of Colleges and Universities hosts a general education workshop, offering teams of faculty the opportunity to spend five nights in eight-by-twelve cinderblock dorm rooms and five days discussing curricular revision with their colleagues and experts in the field. And every year universities from all over the world have their applications declined because there isn't space to accommodate everyone who is interested.

The reasons for this surge in interest in curricular revision are many and are covered in detail in Chapter One. Suffice it to say, though, that much of it has to do with the recognition that the world is changing dramatically and quickly and that the old ways of doing things might not be effective enough anymore. Indeed, the rate of change is such that some would argue that the title of this book is inaccurate: it's not "general" education we're after anymore, a term many associate with breadth and that evolved from Enlightenment and Victorian era ideas about what makes a person cultured. These days, more often than not, the term of choice is *liberal education*, indicating not a left-leaning slant to scholarly thinking but a sense of what it means to create liberated human beings—people who are independent and flexible in their thinking and capable of responding to the demands of a changing world in civic-minded, deliberative ways.

So what does this mean for the people who teach the classes, serve on the committees, and do the scheduling for the next term and the term after that? Quite a bit, actually: it means new opportunities and new challenges. It means lots of discussions with colleagues in their own and other departments; it means some heated debates, some

anxieties, and some new insights that may cause us to look at our work and our students in different ways.

Most of all, though, it means something of a learning curve. There are new terms, new assumptions (often counterintuitive), new data, new methodologies. And while we'd like to think that university faculty would by nature be inclined toward lifelong learning and adaptation to change, when it comes to engaging in an entirely new way of thinking about our work, some of us may be resistant. Perhaps it's because we're so busy or bound to tradition but as one scholar pointed out at a workshop I once attended, "Statistically faculty are more likely to leave their spouses than change institutions." In short, we like our jobs the way they are.

The purpose of this book is not necessarily to alleviate any anxieties we might have about general education, liberal education, or curricular change, though that would be a nice by-product. Rather, I designed and wrote this book to give a quick introduction to current trends in general education reform, as well as a sense of its implications for our work, particularly in the classroom.

General Education Essentials: A Guide for College Faculty is divided into three parts, moving from macro to micro. The titles of each part pretty much speak for themselves. Part One, "The Big Picture," discusses curricular design overall, the trends and options, and why general education is evolving the way it is.

Part Two, "General Education at the Course Level," looks at the implications of this evolution for our work in the classroom: how will it affect syllabi, content, what we do and don't cover in the classroom? As with Part One, Part Two consists first of these ideas in the abstract and then offers several illustrations designed to clarify and spark instructor thinking.