



The Liberal Arts Endeavor: Enacting Values in General Education Reform

General education reform has always been a daunting task, and yet, across higher education there seems to be a new urgency to the undertaking. Today, when the very value of higher education is regularly called into question, reforming the general education curriculum offers colleges and universities an opportunity to reaffirm the founding values of their educational mission to educate future citizens. This mission requires us to reshape a curriculum that is more responsive to the complex challenges of a twenty-first-century, networked world.

General education reform has long been oriented toward cultivating more integrative ways of knowing, but more recent trends tend toward the adoption of practices of public deliberation and more participatory modes of public engagement. For example, Shenandoah University has integrated town hall meetings into its new general education program, requiring students to enroll in a section of the town hall general education course in which assignments are designed to lead up to a major town hall event at the end of the semester.¹ At Portland State University, to take another example, the senior capstone takes students out of the classroom and into the community to build cooperative learning communities.²

As institutions consider how best to fold these dynamic practices of public engagement into their general education curriculum, we would do well also to consider how the processes through which we undertake general education reform embody the values and practices we hope to integrate into the curriculum itself. Enacting the values for which we advocate in transforming general education is important for two related reasons.

First, it affords the faculty an opportunity to learn how to interact with one another and with a broader public across disciplines. As emphasized in the recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* issue brief, *Reforming Gen Ed: Strategies for Success on Your Campus*, a major challenge facing general education reform is how best to empower faculty to think beyond their disciplinary strengths.³ Integrating practices of public deliberation, for example, into the general education reform process itself, enables faculty and students to develop the very habits of public deliberation the new curriculum will be designed to advance. During the general education reform process at Penn State in 2014, we adopted a modified Kettering approach to public deliberation to model the very practices of public deliberation we hoped to integrate into the curriculum as we considered three different approaches to general education.⁴

Second, putting the values of the general education curriculum into practice during the general education reform process deepens the educational community's understanding of and commitment to the importance of general education. Just as it is all too easy to emphasize a loosely connected array of courses in general education, it is also too easy to focus on the minutiae of the general education reform process. The main purpose of general education reform is to facilitate student growth as discerning citizen-employees. We ought, therefore, to practice being discerning citizen-educators ourselves in the curriculum redesign process. Prioritizing this important goal will enable us to more effectively overcome the entrenched institutional inertia that too often prevents us from adopting innovative, interdisciplinary approaches to general education. As Concordia University's general education curriculum emphasizes, we do well to remember the important, enduring questions of life in our work as well: Who are we? Why are we here? What should I care about? How should I act?⁵ Putting our answers to these questions into intentional practice during the very process of general education reform will enable us to advance the arts of liberty we hope to cultivate in our students and learn ourselves.

Here, at the *Journal of General Education*, we want to publish your reflections or research on these enduring questions and the minutiae that accompany your general education reform process. Please submit your writing to our online manuscript portal at <https://www.editorialmanager.com/jge>. We would enjoy discussing potential essay ideas with you as you prepare your thoughts. You can reach us at JGE@press.psu.edu or join our community on Twitter @JournalGenEd.

This double issue of the *Journal of General Education* opens with Aaron Stoller's provocative call-and-response to transform first-year seminars from mere retention strategies to robust critical inquiry experiences. Mark Halx and L. Earle Reybold then offer one perspective on how and why such a critical

inquiry approach can be crucial to general education outcomes; their research indicates that students have better critical-thinking outcomes when they are pushed rather than prompted or permitted to think critically. When designing general education courses like first-year seminars, we would do well to consider the results of Hin-Yan Chan and colleagues, who demonstrate that interactive learning can bring all students along even if they lack prior knowledge in the course's subject matter. Of course, success in one course cannot meet all goals for the general education curriculum. Richard Pitt and colleagues use a novel measure—the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index—to show that majors matter: even when students fulfill their gen ed requirements, the nature and number of their majors (beyond the gen ed curriculum) can help or hinder the goal of exposing students to a broad array of subjects. Derek Sherman then points out that general education is about more than breadth; across the general education curriculum, many institutions have siloed and neglected the role of listening and self-reflection. David Schejbal then argues that such goals for student growth are good for the student not only as a person but also as a future employee. Karim Dharamsi tells how his university understood this dual challenge and reformed its general education curriculum in response. However, Veronica McGowan's research shows that many institutions need to present their general education assessment much more transparently than they currently do if they are to regain stakeholder confidence in general education.

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NOTES

1. "How One College Made Its Gen-Ed Program Feel More Relevant," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-One-College-Made-Its/245402>.

2. See <https://www.pdx.edu/unst/university-studies-program-overview>.

3. Beth McMurtrie, *Reforming Gen Ed: Strategies for Success on Your Campus*, special report, *Chronicle of Higher Education* Issue Brief, November 2018, 9, <https://store.chronicle.com/products/reforming-gen-ed>.

4. Christopher Long, "Deliberating GenEd Reform at Penn State" (blog post), *Christopher P. Long*, January 28, 2014, accessed January 22, 2019, <http://cplong.org/2014/01/deliberating-gened-reform-at-penn-state/>. See, too, Christopher Long, "Deliberating #PSUGenEd" (blog post), *Christopher P. Long*, September 21, 2014, accessed January 23, 2019, <http://cplong.org/2014/09/deliberating-psugened/>.

5. McMurtrie, *Reforming Gen Ed*, 10.