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Exploring the Forms and Features of an Undergraduate General Education Curriculum

By Maureen L. MacKenzie, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

Among the largest financial decisions that a person will make, deciding whether to go to college and where to go, are a few of the highest importance. The average yearly cost to attend a four-year private college is \$21,235 and to attend a four-year public institution is \$5,491 (2005-06 College Costs 2006). This significant financial investment offers an individual the opportunity to gain skills and knowledge that will last throughout life. More specifically, an undergraduate college education enables an individual to express “thoughts clearly in speech and writing, grasp abstract concepts and theories, and increase their understanding of their world and community” (Why Get a College Degree 2006). But for many, college attendance has a practical purpose, because coveted positions require successful completion of the undergraduate degree. Yet, there are varying views on how a general education curriculum should be defined.

The results of a national study undertaken by the Association of Colleges and Universities found that students today require a practical integrated liberal undergraduate education. A *liberal education* is “a practical education because it develops just those capacities needed by every thinking adult: analytical skills, effective communication, practical intelligence, ethical judgment, and social responsibility” (Greater Expectations 2002, 26). An engaging practical *liberal education* must prepare students to meet expectations both in college and after graduation, regardless of the chosen institution or course of study (Humphreys & Davenport 2005). An undergraduate education is a combination of three facets of educational focus: the major – which offers depth into a discipline, the electives and/or a minor – which offer a secondary focus or exploration into a range of topics, and the breadth of *general education*. General education is the “part of a liberal education curriculum shared by all students. It provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing important intellectual and civic capacities. General education can take many different forms” (Greater Expectations 2002, 25).

The purpose of this study is to explore the different forms and features of a *general education* curriculum. The research questions for this study are, what is being done by the more selective top-tier institutions? And, what can Long Island regional colleges learn from the general education curriculums offered by the more selective institutions?

METHOD

Sample

The sampling frame for this study included 100% of the degree granting (Baccalaureate) colleges and universities in close proximity to the Long Island region. This sampling frame included institutions in the states of Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania (eastern schools only) ranked as *more* or *most* selective (America’s Best Colleges 2005). The admissions offices of the resulting 85 schools were contacted and a printed undergraduate catalog requested. Although many had online catalogs, a printed catalog was preferred to do this research. As of the writing of this report, a total of 27 undergraduate catalogs were received. These 27 colleges and universities formed the final sample for this research study.

Data collected

For each school reviewed, the structure of its *general education* program was captured. Three categories sufficiently described all structures. They were:

- a. **Distribution system** (including other requirements). The school was identified as such if the students had a choice of courses from which to select that would satisfy the specific general education requirements. The term distribution system or core may or may not have been used by the school. Various terms were used, such as, divisional requirements, discipline requirements, general institute requirements, general university requirements, distribution requirements.
- b. **Common core (including other requirements)**. The school was identified as such if the students’ choices were limited. Choice may still exist, but courses were developed specifically for the students to satisfy the specific general education requirement. It was the intent of the school that students experience a common core of knowledge.
- c. **Combination system (including other requirements)**. The school was identified as such if both systems were combined. A series of common courses may create a small foundation upon which a distribution system rests; or the school may have referred to the system as a distribution system, but may not have provided students with many courses from which to choose.

The 27 schools' general education programs reviewed, all ranked as MORE or MOST selective, were:

St	Institution	City
CT	Quinnipiac University	Hamden
CT	Trinity College	Hartford
CT	University of Connecticut	Storrs
CT	Wesleyan University	Middletown
CT	Yale University	New Haven
MA	Boston University	Boston
MA	Brandeis University	Waltham
MA	Emerson College	Boston
MA	Hampshire College	Amherst
MA	Mass Institute of Tech (MIT)	Cambridge
MA	Mount Holyoke College	South Hadley
MA	Worcester Polytechnic	Worcester
NJ	Princeton University	Princeton

St	Institution	City
NJ	Ramapo College	Mahwah
NY	Colgate University	Hamilton
NY	Hamilton College	Clinton
NY	Hobart & William Smith	Geneva
NY	Skidmore College	Saratoga Sprg
NY	Stony Brook University	Stony Brook
NY	SUNY Albany	Albany
NY	Vassar College	Poughkeepsie
PA	Bryn Mawr College	Bryn Mawr
PA	Franklin & Marshall	Lancaster
PA	Gettysburg College	Gettysburg
PA	Swarthmore College	Swarthmore
PA	Elizabethtown College	Elizabethtown
PA	St Joseph's University	Philadelphia

Once the broad categories were identified, then the following data was collected:

- The categories within which the general education courses were distributed. In addition to the names of the categories, the common core courses or categories were captured.
- Additional features of the general education program were captured, such as proficiencies required, requirements across the curriculum (e.g., intensive writing), whether students are required to take first year seminars, or other constraints or rules that may be of interest to regional colleges.

Though not as essential, the other information that was captured was: the year the institution was founded, the athletic division, the type of school as identified in the catalog language, the number of undergraduates, and tidbits pulled from the institution's mission statement or general education statement.

A limitation was the lack of consistency across these schools as to *how* the undergraduate catalog was structured. Some schools provided strong details, while some schools provided minimal details. Also, language was inconsistent.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Findings

- 59.3% of the top-tier institutions (16) used a distribution system coupled with additional features or requirements.
- 11.1% of the institutions (3) established a common core of knowledge for their undergraduates.
- The remaining 29.6% of the institutions (8) established a combination system drawing elements from both a distribution system and a common core of knowledge.

Although there were category labels that appeared more often than others, it was clear that schools had different styles in grouping their disciplines. For example, some schools kept "arts" as a separate category, some schools combined "art & humanities", some schools kept "humanities" as a separate category, one school combined "art and literature", while another school labeled the category "creative expression" by combining writing, art, dance, performance, choir, and music. Similarly, natural science, physical science, math, quantitative reasoning, and technology found various ways of being combined and labeled across different schools.

The most common "categories" for the general education requirements were:

- Arts
- Humanities
- Natural/Physical Sciences
- Social Sciences
- Numeric & Symbolic Reasoning/Math
- Foreign Languages

A category to distinguish non-western cultures appeared in various forms:

- Cultures of Africa, Asia, and the Americas
- Non-Western Cultural Heritage (included courses in Anthropology, Political science, Music & Religion)
- Historical Analysis (included courses in East Asian studies, Near Eastern studies, Religions)

Another general education requirement category for a few of the schools was a course in cultural diversity, which found labels such as:

- Continuity and Change in the West
- Diversity & Multiculturalism
- Community, Culture and Society
- Cultural and Social Science
- Global Diversity
- U.S. Diversity

If an institution had a special focus, it may have appeared in its general education distribution requirements. For example, Emerson College had heavy communication and expression requirements, while MIT had a heavy and specific science core, even for non-science majors. For the few schools with a common core of knowledge, courses included some of the following:

- The Craft of Language
- The Human Person
- Fundamentals of Speech Communication
- Texts and Contexts

When considering features or requirements of the general education program, many of the schools had a *writing proficiency* component. Students entering could provide evidence of proficiency with a strong verbal SAT I score, an AP exam or sufficient performance on the college placement/entrance evaluation exam. Similarly, many schools had a “*writing across the curriculum*” component. Rather than students taking an English writing course, other courses either in the general education disciplines or in the major and minor satisfied the writing intensive component.

Many of these top-tier schools had either or both a foreign language proficiency requirement that could be satisfied with an SAT II score, an AP score, or passing a 3rd year NYS Regents exam, and/or an in-school foreign language requirement.

Similar to writing, many of the schools required a *quantitative reasoning* (numeric and symbolic reasoning) proficiency. For some schools, incoming students may provide evidence of proficiency with SAT I scores, ACT scores, AP scores, or college entrance exam. Some schools, though few, did not mention a quantitative requirement. This may be the result of such highly selective admission requirements, that the school does not need to test for this proficiency. Also, the math requirements may be embedded within the majors.

Noticeably, the general education requirements of these top-tier schools focused on *breadth* rather than depth. Except for one of the schools with a common core, course sequence requirements did not exist within the general education curriculum. For example, students could take as little as 1 course in each category. If more than 1 course was required, sequencing was not a constraint.

Another trend was the existence of 1st year seminars to help students make the transition into college. Many of these 1st year seminars also satisfied the writing-intensive requirement.

The findings suggested that schools did not constrain students from transferring general education courses from other institutions. Many of the *most* selective schools resisted accepting AP exams as credit, but accepted coursework from other accredited institutions prior to the student matriculating. Swarthmore was an exception. It did accept general education transfer credits but required that 2 credits in each of the 3 divisions be completed at Swarthmore. Although there were residency requirements for the schools, they did not appear to be within the general education component of the curriculum.

A few interesting and note-worthy general education features/components that emerged during this research:

- MIT has a freshman-grading program – if a C or better is earned, then a “P” appears in the student’s record. If a D or an F is earned, then the course earns no credit and will never appear on any external reports/transcripts. This policy permits students to explore challenging topics without fearing non-reversible GPA damage.
- Hampshire College requires students to compile a portfolio of writing samples and course evaluations from all general education classes taken in the 1st two semesters. The advisor reviews the portfolio to determine if the student can move on to the next step in his or her program.
- Hampshire College has a community service requirement in the general education program.
- University of Connecticut and SUNY Albany each have an information literacy component, similar to the “writing across the curriculum” program. Courses within different disciplines can be tagged as appropriate to satisfy this proficiency requirement.

Summary: The results of this research may provide Long Island and regional colleges with a broader perspective of what top-tier schools are doing to ensure a strong foundation in the liberal arts and sciences for their undergraduate students. The mission statements of these schools consistently demonstrate a commitment to a *practical liberal education* and to promote the value of an *integrated* curriculum that spans the entire undergraduate curriculum. Sentiments within the mission statement or in the general education overview support the student’s personal and academic interests, and as a result offer the student a flexible, yet challenging curriculum.

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