1972

General Education: What Type of Structure?

Woodburn O. Ross  
Wayne State University

Lawrence E. Taliana  
Southern Illinois University

Harold Schroeder  
Southern Illinois University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Liberal Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives/vol4/iss1/4

This Panel is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Michigan University at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives (1969-1979) by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.
General Education:  
What Type of Structure?  
Panel Discussion  

DR. WOODBURN O. ROSS  
Former dean, Monteith College, Wayne State University  

(Transcript of an extemporaneous talk, edited for publication by Joseph M. Condie.)

I begin my remarks by imitating a brother of a friend of mine when he was starting a speech. He said, "Before I begin my speech I have something to say." I find I have something to say before I begin. I wish to echo certain remarks of the speaker of the morning, Dr. Commoner. He comments upon the fact that there is nothing in the nature of things which makes it necessary to study biology, the discipline of biology, history, the discipline of history, English, the discipline of English. That remark gives me, personally, great pleasure. It has seemed to me, particularly in my position as Dean of Monteith, that this indeed the state of affairs. A shocking number of academics feel that these various disciplines, enshrined in departments, do exist in the very nature of things, ordained by God almighty and that this is the only way to do it. He's a little more pessimistic than I am about the possibility of some good shock troops making a fine attack on these disciplines. We have been in existence at Wayne for twelve years and I should say that we at least rest on a quite secure foundation. It has
been difficult on occasions but it seems to me that it is by no means an impossible task. I mean to speak words of encouragement.

One second comment as I proceed to my speech. The word “interdisciplinary.” I should like to say that word might well be conceived of as a dirty word. I do not think that structured general education programs should conceive of themselves as being interdisciplinary studies. They may draw their materials from other disciplines, but thinking of them as being interdisciplinary creates difficulties. This kind of concept leads historically, I think, to the notion that general education is a bit of this, and a bit of this, and a bit of this. What does one do in humanities, for example? (I picked that as a common interdisciplinary study in general education and probably the one which is least well defined across the country.) Well, you can get a bit of literature and a bit of something else in the area of the arts. I have seen programs that are built primarily around history and so on. It seems to me that instead there should be a discipline called “humanities” such a discipline rapidly growing in the country. This is the study of the world of the arts—man and the arts. It may draw all it likes upon previously existing disciplines, but it should enjoy autonomy. A humanities program, if I may say so, being an English professor, does a better job of introducing the student to the world of the arts than the English department can do. In the old days it was customary for the English department to do this job—this is what its underclass courses were generally set up to do.

Now I’ve taken so much time in introductory remarks that I’m going to confine myself simply to a series of statements. I had planned originally to amplify these a bit and perhaps argue them a bit. Perhaps you can remember them as I make them. They are designed to be challenging and I should be happy to answer challenges from my fellow panelists here. I’m sure there will be some, and from the floor.

First of all, a structured general education program, in my opinion, should be taught by a faculty permanently assigned to it. Not by one whose members are plowed into it and out of it and into it again. This concept of the transitory character of the staff of the general education program, it seems to me, is responsible, more than any other, for the low esteem in which such programs are frequently held. No wonder—I said I was going to argue it, didn’t I? No wonder, here you have a man who is doing the entire formal general education job with his left hand; his promotion, his salary, his prestige, none of these things ride on what he is doing there. If the situation were to be developed so that precisely these things did ride upon what he does in the general education program, I think you would get very different results.

Point two: Such a general education program should be, here again I repeat myself a little, made of subjects which are themselves new disciplines. But I want to diverge from what I said before. New
disciplines, not introductory to anything; they stand on their own feet. They're introductory to the life of the student, not introductory to further academic work. The real grip of present college programs comes along after the student has passed the sophomore year and gets on to his specialty. The whole concept that a college education, in our country at this time, must be built around a specialty seems to me sadly outworn.

Again, general education programs must have their own promotions—criteria for faculty members. And I suggest that these criteria should revolve about the effectiveness of the faculty member in teaching. I suggest further that the old song we frequently hear that you can't measure the effectiveness of the faculty member in teaching is no more valid than the countercharge that you cannot adequately gauge the effectiveness of what a faculty member writes unless he writes something very brilliant. There is nothing that stops any administration, any department, any group of faculty members from opening the doors of every classroom to their colleagues. I once proposed this to a department, of which I was a member, saying let's visit each other. I was on the personnel committee of the department at the time and that's why I was sticking my nose into these matters. I said smilingly, we've heard from a fair number of you people. All of you are first-rate teachers. We know it because you said so. And really, except for casual student gossip, we had no other criteria at all by which to go. I proposed that we open the doors of all classrooms, that we visit each other. (You can develop a spirit, in accord with which, professors do visit each other's classroom.) The vote was 42 to 3, opposed—in the name of "academic freedom."

And last of all, general education programs should be wary of putting their students into laboratories. These are expensive and of doubtful value to students not majoring in one of the sciences. The library should be the principle campus resource of general education. Training students in the proper use of the library is a tremendous enough task. Very little that we do today, I think, is effective along this line.

DR. LAWRENCE E. TALIANA
Assistant Vice President and Professor of Psychology
Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville

(Transcript of an extemporaneous talk, edited for publication by Joseph M. Condie)

I'll preface my comments with a brief statement that my ideas are undoubtedly influenced by some recent experiences as well as based
upon a diversity of professional activities both within universities and without. Two recent national conferences concerned with contemporary and future educational trends have influenced some of my thoughts and deepened my prejudices. The first of these conferences, one sponsored by the Department of Defense and dealing with an appeal to higher education within the various armed service branches, sharpened my awareness for some of the apparent inflexibility within higher education. The second conference, and that little more than a week ago, sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, concerned itself with new directions for higher education. Perhaps the reason that I felt the message of these conferences a bit more strongly is that they tended to surface and crystallize some observations that I have made about contemporary higher education.

One salient feature emerging is that we must do more to reflect the needs of our students. This is what I think students have been trying to tell us for several years. These needs cannot go unanswered any longer since they have gone unheeded for some time. At an urban institution such as Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, the student constituency is much more diverse than one would find on the traditional residential campus. But even granting that, the characteristics and needs of students on residential campuses are also changing. Although the concept of individual differences as it relates to the learning process is fundamental, it's surprising how it's ignored in much of our educational programming.

On a campus such as the one we have here, individual differences have terrific import to the people. Developmental aspects such as experiential background, chronological age, etc. pose a range of differences. We have here the traditional high school graduate entering college for the first time, the mother and wife who has just placed her youngest in primary school, the mother who has sent her last child off to college, the grandmother who is bored by the afternoon "cocktail hour," the engineer who has just been eased into retirement at age 50, the harassed store manager who seeks a greater understanding of the society and his own role and identity, as well as the returning late adolescent drop-out. A diversity of needs and interests is present. There is little doubt about this.

Layman, in his 1953 "Age of Achievement" article, points out the differences in age for superior contributions in fields of creativity. For example, in the physical science, for some reason, such contributions occur in the mid-twenties and late-twenties for chemistry, but late thirties in geology and astronomy. In the literary fields, poetry contributions tend to be most significant at the mid-twenties, but novels and prose in the mid-forties. Other examples of these developmental differences can be cited but I shall not digress at this time. They do have implications for educational structure, I think. Perhaps, as Henry
David Atkin states in his "Predictament of the University," there is a need to extend general education into the graduate schools as well.

Another feature that must be considered and one which academic traditions ignore is the changing societal scene which places additional demands upon our educational enterprises. Because of the lacks in our society which I shall not discuss at this time, the traditional experiences that adolescents or students brought to the college scene in former years are lacking in many students today. As Dr. Commoner said, we must provide more involvement with experience and the real world. As a result, we need to devise new ways to provide such experiences as part of general education, and also devise the means of assessing that experience and awarding appropriate academic credit. The scientific knowledge is available to develop such assessment procedures. To my notion the only thing we lack is, perhaps, the mechanisms and the inclination. What I am saying is new performance measures for granting academic credit are possible. At this institution we lack only the administrative structure and mechanism for doing this, with perhaps certain limitations placed upon us by certain individuals who control our purse strings. The importance of experience and its lack within the contemporary society suggest the development of general education around work experience and off-campus programs as well as appropriate experiential activity within the University structure.

On our campus, the history of general education or General Studies has not been perfect by any means. An analysis of the content of general education courses would show most do not fit the broadest definition of general education. For the most part, these courses are most relevant for the specific academic discipline. This travesty defeats the purpose of general education and certainly is not meeting the needs of contemporary students at all developmental levels. Fortunately, efforts are under way to correct this.

It is generally recognized that to project the future in job trends is difficult. This has consequences for our general education program. Few, I think, would argue with the notion that the best way to prepare our students for life and the world of work is to educate them so that they may learn how to learn. Learning from all indications is to be a life-long process. The notion that we can prepare for a career and rest upon that for the remainder of our lives is not consistent with the real world. As a result, it becomes even more important for general education to provide the kinds of experiences that would lead to flexibility and maximum alternate routes to new careers and professions throughout one's lifetime. Learning how to learn, the development of flexibility, being skilled in human relations, learning how to be aware of what's happening about him or her, and in general, development of an individual who is capable of coping with change is the type of educational experience that is desirable. I think this is the
sort of thing that Toffler speaks about in *Future Shock*. Many businesses and industries do not rely upon formal training in a discipline but prefer to train individuals on the job. Realizing this and in keeping with the points just mentioned, the academic community must become more involved in the society around it. I think there is evidence around us that the University community is becoming aware of this. But the old outlook is still an immensely well-fixed attitude in the faculty as a whole. This must be overcome. If institutions of higher education are to survive, this societal characteristic must be recognized.

Few would reject the notion that our institutions of higher learning probably possess the best inventory of brainpower of any institution in our society today. We must harness that brainpower to attack the problems that confront us. New organizational structures and modifications of existing general education patterns may be a vehicle by which we can attack the problems. I am extremely doubtful whether the type of restructuring necessary can occur within the traditional academic disciplines. The need for specialization and intensive attention to the detail of those disciplines militates against the types of education we are speaking of. This is not to say that it cannot occur, but I contend that for the most part it does not occur. In most disciplines there are some individuals who are interested in problems of general education but they frequently give up the struggle and succumb to the peer pressure.

With that I should close by saying that my intent is not to pour the finished beverage of the fermentation process but to activate the grape crushing during the discussion.

---

**DR. HAROLD SCHROEDER**

Professor of Business Administration
Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville

*(Transcript of an extemporaneous talk, edited for publication by Joseph M. Condic)*

Good morning. When you discovered that a second psychologist had come to speak to you, you probably began to suspect there is some reason why psychologists turn toward a generalist interest. Perhaps, you might think they don’t have very strong disciplinary concerns within psychology. Let me assure you that psychologists in general, are just as disciplinary-oriented as biologists, chemists, or any other departmental group on this campus or any other campus.

I would like to take what you might, perhaps, consider a very specific look at the problem of general education. I would like to
stress the criteria of education and suggest that the type of structure we have in a university will always pretty much be dependent upon the type of criteria we use to measure education. These two, the measurement criteria and the structure, will always go hand-in-hand with each other. I want to make the distinction between what we proclaim we do in education and what we actually do. In other words, if we went around this room or some other room and asked each professor: What do you really try to do?, he would give a lot of noble statements about what he is trying to achieve in order to develop the student, or develop the university, or whatever it might be. However, most of these things, if you look into it, are not measured.

And yet, despite what I have just said, we do measure certain things in the university very strictly. The things we measure determine the structure of the University, the general education program, or whatever part of the University you are talking about. So let's see what we measure.

We all know what things we measure, but let's just review them just to make sure. The first thing we measure is the number of hours of exposure a student has. That's number one. Let’s not kid ourselves that it is the most important thing because the student cannot graduate unless he has the required number of hours of exposure. No matter what else he does, it is just sitting there being exposed that we measure most of all and it's counted on a clock. That's number one. The second thing we measure, and this is probably equally as important as the first, is the number of disciplines he gets exposed to. The student cannot pass, or graduate, or get anywhere in the University, he can’t even exist for a quarter unless he takes something in so many disciplines. And note that’s how it's put to him; it is not put to him in terms of his interest. It's put to him in terms of so many disciplines. And again this is simple counting, although we do it very efficiently. It’s no different than counting up to four or two or something like this. The third criteria we use—that we measure—is the amount of knowledge that the person acquires in disciplines. Because it is on a scale, he probably can know nothing and still get through. So, we’ve got these three criteria.

Now I know you may object to this account. I know I would too if I were a teacher at St. John’s. But if you look closely at the stuff that comes out of the university—the output—that is really what we are measuring: total exposure time, disciplinary distribution, and grade. In a mass institution, the grade pretty much measures only the amount of disciplinary information that a student acquires. It cannot do much more because, for one thing, we don’t have time to grade other things. So those are the three criteria and the way they’re weighted.

The next thing we have to be aware of when we talk about struc-
ture is that the criteria give us feedback and actually support the structure that we already have. In other words, once we have these criteria, they will operate to build, support and maintain a certain kind of structure. That's exactly what has happened. The structure that we have fits the criteria. It is optimal to accomplish the ends which we measure.

It is optimal—it's beautiful. That's the first thing to remember. It's perfect. You couldn't design a better system. The system evolved, it adapted and gradually got to be perfect for accomplishing these measured goals or criteria. I would maintain that it's an exceedingly efficient structure. I don't think the world has ever evolved a better structure to accomplish these ends so efficiently. Think of it. We bring students in and in a short period of time (a matter of four years) accomplish a complex set of goals. Maybe the goals are ones the students don't want, maybe they don't like to do it and all this kind of thing, but they do it. The thing that amazes me is that we do it at all.

Now if we want to change the system what we do is this. We try to change the structure a bit. But anything we do with the structure will have a very low rate of return because we can't do much better with the things we measure, no matter what we do. So the thesis I'm trying to present (it's probably a common one) is simply that change will occur in the structure of the university or any other institution only if you change the criteria.

By changing the criteria I don't mean saying it in our heads and at graduation days. I mean we measure it somehow. That's just what Barry Commoner told you this morning—the reason why we have pollution of the rivers is because we didn't measure certain things. I think the same thing is true in education. We're not measuring certain things. Certain kinds of output that we say we want we're not measuring. Well, there are criteria, of course, to measure such things. We could set up a General Studies program in terms of whether or not we get the student interested in something like the arts or sciences or education. We might measure that criterion by the number of books he takes out of the library. This would be a different system all together from the present one. We might set up as a goal something like conceptual maturity. Then we would measure the range of information and concepts the students bring to bear on problems. That's a different kind of criteria. Note, we would not be measuring here how much he knows about psychology or biology. Having given him a problem, a real problem, one like the environment, we would measure the range of information and concepts he brings to bear when he has a go at that problem, when he thinks about it, when he works on it. I maintain these could be measured equally as reliably as grades. For one, I don't think that we measure grades reliably or validly. I mean grading is the most mystical system in the world. We could measure other things just
as well, perhaps a lot better. I'm sure we could measure interest much more accurately than knowledge.

Let's say we added interest and conceptual maturity to our list of goals. Let me briefly set forth the structure to achieve these two. First of all, we would have to offer the students a choice not from a range of disciplines but from a range of topics, problems, areas of interest. So we would move toward offering topics rather than disciplines. For example, religion, urban problems, environmental problems. Barry Commoner gave a beautiful example this morning of how you can take a problem like ecology and give a student the option to do that, not to do biology.

Now that's not to say he's not also doing biology. I think the speaker this morning pointed out you still weigh the discipline. The disciplines still come in. I would disagree with some of the people here that think you have to attack the disciplines. We must have the discipline. I think the disciplines are required because what the disciplines do is to provide the way for you, the biologist, for example, to measure the world and to tell us how to view the world from a biological perspective. The biologist answers the question: What biological information can we gather? This is necessary. The same thing is true for the economist, etc. It is necessary. However, it's not necessary for a student to just study biology or just study economics. I think we ought to give him topics and let him learn what the needs for the topic are rather than learning biology, etc. in isolation. Well, anyhow, this issue is a fairly complicated thing.

Secondly, as Larry Taliana said, I think we should begin to offer students the choice of educational environment. At present, we offer a very rigid educational environment, a very authoritarian type. Given the proper orientation, if the students were to pick topics, urban, environmental, etc., then you could offer a range of environments. Some students prefer a pretty structured environment to work in, others might be able to work in rather loose environments as in some of the new universities where they work pretty much in private study and that kind of thing. But we could offer some variation for students which would take care of individual differences and needs. Of course, we would have to staff these programs differently.

The thing we are arguing for here is for some kind of differentiating of programs within universities. To achieve it we would have to change the criteria. We would have to get rid of concepts like credit hours. We would have to start budgeting programs to do this. Thank you.