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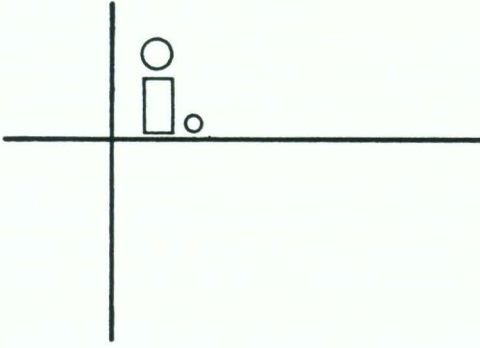
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Developing General Studies: Recollections of A General Studies Chairman

By BENJAMIN P. MEHRLING

Five years ago I accepted a combination position at a small mid-western college as Chairman of General Studies and Associate Professor of Philosophy. Although I was generally ignorant of the field at the time, I eagerly welcomed the challenge.

I was assigned, with the assistance of a General Studies Council made up of faculty and students, the responsibility for designing a new general studies program for the college.

What Is General Studies?

Within a very short time I discovered that the members of our council along with the college community as a whole held either vague or incredibly different understandings of the term "general studies." For a time there appeared to be no common ground for discussion within and beyond the council except our commitment to "general studies"—whatever that term meant—as important.

I pored through more than a hundred college and university catalogues, from which I received some good ideas but not the definitional help I was seeking.

Then I visited campuses within and beyond our state to interview persons connected with general studies programs. Although I often drove away from those campuses highly stimulated by what I heard and saw going on under the heading of general studies, there seemed to be no unifying resemblance among many of the programs.

By this time, however, I had at least decided that the term "general studies" had been functioning frequently like "motherhood" and "country" words. Educators joined with enthusiasm in raising and saluting the general studies flag, but their understandings of the term were so diverse and unclear that they could scarcely communicate with one another.

I wisely decided to temporarily suspend the search for a single unifying definition and began to look for assumptions which were functioning as foundations for the programs that I knew of or were being suggested for our college. I discovered they could be subsumed under five headings.

(1) General Studies as Introductory Studies. Quite often general studies courses were assumed to be the "first course" of the various disciplines, such as "Introduction to Sociology." Taken together, these courses were regarded to comprise the general studies curriculum. They were openly defended as foundation courses; they were quietly promoted as a means of snagging a few majors for the department.

The "first course" approach generally characterized the program in existence at our college when I arrived. During the period of deliberations we added experimental and student-directed courses.

(2) General Studies Courses as Common Studies. According to this view, it is the obligation of our institutions of higher education to "expose" students to certain knowledge through courses determined in advance of their initiation into the community. I discovered that the term general studies was often employed euphemistically for "prescribed common curriculum," and thus became identified in the minds of faculty and students with general graduation requirements.

(3) General Studies as Survey Studies. This approach promoted general studies as a core, or series of blocks of courses which the students should be required to take year by year, such as the humanities block, the social science block, etc.

(4) General Studies as Nondepartmental Studies. Sometimes courses which have not seemed to fall easily under the traditional departments have ended up under general studies. Consequently, general studies was sometimes used as a receptacle for new courses which traditional departments could not logically claim and did not want.

(5) General Studies as Interdisciplinary Studies. Since this is the approach our General Studies Council decided to develop, I shall describe it in greater detail below.

I shall not attempt to discuss here the strengths and limitations of the various approaches. I do want to stress, however, that the separation of general studies along the lines of assumptions such as I have done can be very useful. It was for us. It led to productive discussion. We were now able to identify what we were talking about as we joined in searching for the most appropriate approach for our college.

The matter of graduation requirements had also been a barrier to fruitful discussion. Four distinctions with respect to types of courses served to liberate us from the overwhelming problems which arose from the identification of general studies courses with required courses. There are, we decided, required courses leading to a major, elective courses, general graduation requirements, *and* general studies courses, which may or may not be required for graduation, depending upon the institution's approach to general studies.

Resistance

We thought we had overcome our greatest difficulties, that we could now get moving toward preparing a recommendation and developed a program along the lines of one or more of the previously mentioned approaches.

We were wrong. Resistances—frustrating, amusing, pathetic—began to surface, all stemming from the fear of what might happen to the existing departments if general studies were to become a separate sector, such as a division or department.

As long as the general studies courses were assumed primarily to be the “first course” offered by existing departments, there was no question that the departments would exercise control over content, methodology, and staff. But the suggestion that general studies might better be a separate sector aroused fears over the future power, status, and size of the departments: the formation of a separate sector might lead to a decrease in the number of faculty within existing departments; a favored drawing card, namely, the “first course,” might be lost; and student registrations for the “first course” might be drastically lower if they were required to compete with general studies courses.

In general, the objections pertained to a redistribution of power which would be brought about by the establishment of a general studies sector.

A Center for Interdisciplinary Dialog

After two years of searching, the General Studies Council agreed upon an approach to general studies which they deemed to be most appropriate for our college. In the meantime, most of the barriers appeared either to have crumbled or to be surmountable. We felt we needed only the general will to make the program work.

The recommendations we were preparing to take to the faculty for approval contained the following essential provisions:

- (1) A meaningfully reformed general studies program at our college would require the creation of general studies as a separate sector.
- (2) Interdisciplinary dialog would be the goal of the proposed

program. We would therefore recommend the name, "The Center for Interdisciplinary Dialog." We regarded the term as self-defining: it would function as a guide to clarify our goals and limit our activity.

(3) General studies, as we conceived it, was to be more than a list of courses: it was to be an aggressive attempt to bring together students, faculty, and administrators for meaningful discussion on issues and ideas which directly affect human existence.

The role of the General Studies Council was to provide both formal and spontaneous "opportunities" for interdisciplinary discussion. In addition to courses, formalized opportunities were to include the publication of a journal and the organization of forums, panels, symposiums, and debates—all encouraging participation from the entire campus community and guided by the goals set for general studies.

Courses were mainly to have been those which bring the various disciplines to bear upon problems and issues. The council planned to organize interdisciplinary approaches to the study of the environment, the nature of man, the past decade, the future of mankind, and so on.

In summary, our objective was to transcend (or was it to break down?) disciplinary barriers and to get the campus dialoguing about great enduring and immediate issues and ideas.

We observed an unmistakable increase of interest in the proposal among the faculty and students. Some faculty members expressed a desire to divide their teaching load between their area of specialization and general studies. Trial courses were well received. The deans supported the proposal wholeheartedly. The council was optimistic that the faculty would approve its recommendations, even though they were aware of some reluctance and opposition. One person was overheard asking rhetorically: How do we know it will work since we've never tried it!

Why the Proposal Failed

The program could have stimulated vitality in every segment of the college; however, it never reached the faculty for a decision. Our optimism and belief in the proposal had deterred us from taking a hard look at the realities which combined to defeat it.

(1) We had not succeeded in convincing enough people that an interdisciplinary approach to general education is a good idea and that, at least at our college, it needed to be structured as a separate department. Although we had communicated through writing and small groups, we did not try hard enough to present the advantages of the proposal to reluctant individuals. We tended to ignore the dissenters and to assume that the silent people were at least nominal supporters. We generally overlooked the fact that support was mainly coming from the younger and non-tenured members of the faculty, that the length of tolerance of the tenured faculty was shortening as the

council moved from the stage of experimentation toward a concrete long-range plan (one which appeared to permanently affect every segment of college life), and that the "idea" of interdisciplinary education was being received by some with apathy, by others with fear and mistrust, and by others as unimportant and faddish.

Of course, everyone gave lip service to the idea of synthesis. Actually, however, synthesis was not being practiced nor seriously advocated, except within the General Studies Council. I recall that interdisciplinary conversation was avoided even among the faculty. By some kind of curious mutual consent, one's area of specialization was regarded as his private domain, not to be shared with or tested by faculty connected with other departments. Conversations at the coffee lounge centered upon sporting events, campus politics, or some annoying student. I suspect that the reason for the erection of these barriers is that interdisciplinary dialog can be terribly threatening and upsetting, for it is almost certain to mess up the tidy theories and strain the bars of caged knowledge one may hold at the cost of isolation and ignorance of other perspectives and knowledge.

(2) The second reason was an absence of qualified persons to conduct the program coupled with virtually no hope that the college would soon be employing persons qualified for producing a successful interdisciplinary program.

The range of competence varied considerably among the "volunteers" mentioned earlier. And how does one convert specialists into generalists, particularly when such persons are presently focusing their attention upon attaining the doctorate or have only recently received the degree? Besides, the environment and structure of the graduate institutions in which they studied and our own college tended to reinforce the "division of labor" approach—not according to the model of Plato or St. Paul, but of the assembly line of industrial-technological society.

Furthermore, we could no longer depend upon the annual modest turnover and increase in faculty of recent former years to provide openings for teachers with backgrounds and interests compatible with our goals. Instead, the college faced a declining student enrollment, a deficit budget, virtually no faculty resignations, and an attempt by the administration to reduce the total faculty.

Finally, for the most part chairmen tended to resist releasing teachers from their departments for interdisciplinary teaching.

(3) The first two reasons were significant but not at all decisive in defeating the program. The main reason must be attributed to the triumph of political over pedagogical considerations. Unquestionably the proposal threatened the status, influence, and power of some of the heads of departments and divisions, for not only had the proposal called for general studies to become a new and separate department,

it abolished the first course as synonymous with general studies. Vast changes within the existing departments could be expected: fewer faculty, fewer students, fewer course offerings, loss of control over content and methodology in certain instances, and the loss of a means of enticing majors.

Within this climate a faculty personnel committee made up of department and division chairmen decided that I should not be granted tenure. The one vote in my favor came from a member of the General Studies Council with whom I had shared in teaching an experimental interdisciplinary course.

Although both the Academic Dean and President felt that an appeal of the decision would probably lead to its reversal, I moved on, a wiser man, spirited by a confidence in the enormous possibilities for general studies to vitalize American education, but regretful that our college had allowed an opportunity to pass by for self-transformation and leadership in general education.

After my departure the proposal was put aside and general studies was set adrift.

