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General and Liberal Studies for the Career Oriented Student

General Education: Developing Life Skills for a World in Persistent Transformation

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One often hears these days that we are entering an age of increased vocationalism, with students at the nation's colleges and universities scrambling over each other in their attempts to develop marketable skills in order to land that crucial first job. Richard Little speaks of a "rampant careerism (or 'grim professionalism,' as Kingman Brewster has labelled it) among students who have entered college during the past several years." According to Little, "a college education has always been perceived as providing the best general preparation for productive and satisfying careers following graduation, but the demand these days is for specific curricula which will lead to specific careers for which there is a demonstrable market."

Needless to say, colleges of liberal arts and sciences are feeling the pressures to come up with new gimmicks in order to keep their students and profit from the occupationally oriented "bandwagon." Thus the trend appears to be toward encouraging students into increased specialization.

While it is certainly not my intention to deny the importance of having students develop specialized "marketable" skills, it is equally
important to keep in mind that there is a life “beyond careerism” (Little's terminology), and that liberal arts colleges would be doing students a grave disservice by failing to help them develop a set of basic human capabilities or general life skills which will enable them not only to survive but also to thrive in a world engaged in persistent transformation. To quote the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Bowling Green State University, “... the most extensive and central role of the colleges of arts and sciences ... [is that of] liberal or general education. This role is not new, for it finds its origin in the best classic tradition of higher education. It is a role of helping the individual to think critically and analytically about himself, his environment, and his relationship to that environment. ... In short, the role of the liberal arts college is to develop the self-motivated and self-directed learner who will continue to employ his critical faculties both to his own and to society’s advantage throughout his life.”

Nevertheless, higher education’s increasing commitment to the development of professional skills serves to highlight much that is troublesome in what is traditionally called general education. While professional education is goal-specific and allows for reasonable accountability, general education remains amorphous, intuitive, and devoid of anything approaching “hard” criteria. The suspicion grows that what passes for general education on our nation’s campuses is often an aimless patchwork of introductions to departmental curricula, peripheral to the real business of an academic community.

A number of us at Bowling Green have been consciously attempting to work with the premise that general education is a central, rather than peripheral, mission of colleges and universities—one that may, in the long run, be the sole justification for retaining all of the more specialized capabilities of the university in a single institutional setting. We further assume that competency-based learning is an educational approach that promises an effective redefinition and reaffirmation of the general education mission.

We have defined general education as education which seeks to develop a core of specific, but highly transferable (hence general), skills. We see these skills critical to mature human performance in a complex and rapidly changing society. They are vocational skills, in the sense that a capacity to master competencies and perspectives in new work contexts is vocationally relevant. They are liberal skills, in the sense that a capacity to challenge dominant assumptions and to pursue the consequences of alternate models of experience is both self and socially liberating.

General education conceived in this fashion quite clearly becomes the most comprehensive and demanding challenge colleges and universities might address. It represents a mission long implicit in higher education which needs to be made both explicit and central.
This competency-based view of skill development has several justifications: First, it is impossible to predict what knowledge and information individuals will need in the future. Second, it is vital that education be concerned with helping individuals acquire the generalizable and adaptive skills which have the power to serve them well in new situations. Third, the store of knowledge is too great to sustain hope for any simple knowledge transmission model of general education.

The above view of general education suggests that it is both the foundation and the capstone of learning. It is the foundation in the sense that it provides the student with the necessary tools and perspectives to enable him to understand and master complex principles and concepts. It is the capstone in the sense that it enables students to evaluate the utility of those principles and concepts and to appraise their limitations.

Seen in this light, general education becomes the essence of the baccalaureate: "... attuned to the need to prepare the student to think critically about himself, his life, and his future, and to take steps to ensure that the decisions he makes accord with the goals he has articulated for himself ... The purpose of education is to help the student determine his goals and objectives and to utilize correctly the cognitive tools at his disposal in concert with the appropriate effective orientations (themselves cognitively specified) in order to carry out effectively the implementation of those goals and objectives."4

In this view, there is a very close inter-connection between general and specialized education. The two form a continuum in which the basic competencies developed through the general education curriculum are developed still further and utilized in the solution of (or at least in the pursuit of a solution to) complex problems of a more specialized nature. Thus, both general and specialized education take on a "process" focus in which the content to be studied is an integral part of, while nonetheless subordinated to, the development of a process of understanding reality.

The content-process dilemma is articulated as follows by James Gass of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development: "On the one hand specialization, which has been and doubtless will remain a powerful instrument of our technical progress, is the very basis of our educational system. This specialization is blind to the consequences of the progress it generates. During the events of May, 1968 [in Europe] there was an expression which seemed to me to reflect this idea; it was the term, coined, I think, by German students, of Fachidiot—a person who knows all the facts but who has no idea how to deal with the problems. On the other hand, the separation of theory and practice which goes right to the roots of our educational systems, creates a feeling of frustration, at least to some students."5
One cannot quarrel with Mr. Gass that there must be an integration of theory and practice, and that general education without the development of specialized capabilities will find liberal arts colleges graduating, according to Howard Figler, “large numbers of Benjamin Braddocks, who are directionless, uncertain about their futures, and despairing about their potential for future employment.” Nevertheless one must caution educators that “increased specialization is not necessarily the answer to society’s problems. The overly specialized individual lacking in the appropriate evaluative tools or in the psychological preparation to use them is just as subject to ‘future shock’ as the non-specialist.”

It is general education which enables the student to relate his specialized skills to a rapidly changing world in which the expertise appropriate to one’s first job might not necessarily apply to one’s second or third; and it is general education which develops in students a set of general capabilities or coping skills which will enable them to transfer successfully from one occupational endeavor to another as certain of their skills become obsolete. In fact, David Brown, Provost of Miami University, speaks of issuing a “liberal certificate” which “might indicate to the student and others who are interested that this particular individual is likely to be able to adjust to radical changes in circumstances, and even to the elimination of a profession.”

Armand Burke and Joseph Harkin of SUNY-Brockport both appear to agree with the above view of general education: “According to Harkin, . . . the inclination to move to a more specialized program of study would not allow the student to develop both awareness and other skills to be used in adapting to personal life experiences. General education is thus necessary to develop problem-solving skills which can be applied to [problem] situations. ‘The movement towards specialism totally is basically education for extinction. Without the accompanying intellectual process component, college majors come out as technicians rather than as process-oriented technologists.’ Reinforcing this notion, Burke stressed that, rather than educating for extinction, baccalaureate degree programs should ‘educate for survival.’” Thus competencies gained in general education should transcend any career or area of specialization to give the individual a foundation to deal effectively with new problems and new situations. General education thus becomes the basis for life-long learning and increases one’s ability to be self-directing. In short, it provides a “survival kit” for the rest of one’s life.

Bowling Green State University has recently embarked on two ventures designed to help students prepare their own “survival kits” for the future. The first is the University Division of General Studies and the second is the Center for Competency-based Undergraduate Education. The University Division is an administrative agency created...
to encourage the development of both disciplinary and interdisciplin­
ary programs at the general education level to help students attain
basic skills in critical thinking, communication, problem solving, infor­
mation retrieval, value clarification, and conflict resolution. In addition, the Division will attempt to implement an advising and counsel­
ing philosophy relating general education skill development to the
articulation and pursuit of career and life goals. It will continue the
work of Bowling Green's Carnegie-funded Modular Achievement Pro­
gram in developing a competency-based, time-flexible baccalaureate
program.

The Division will work closely with the Competency-based Under­
graduate Education Center, recently funded through a large grant
from the Fund for the Improvement for Post-Secondary Education
of H.E.W. The CUE Center, directed by Gary Woditsch, has been
established primarily as a research agency charged with the task of
assisting faculty in the attempt to define more clearly the basic com­
petencies or general life skills needed by an individual in order to
lead both a satisfactory and a productive life. The Center hopes to
bring together a group of scholars, both from the Bowling Green com­

munity and from elsewhere, to engage in systematic research on the
nature and function of general education, with the hope that, as a
result of such research, a number of competency-based models might
be developed to help the student attain the basic skills described above.

It is hoped that the Division and the Center, working together,
will enable faculty members to gain new insights into and new per­
spectives on general education, and to relate these new insights and
new perspectives to the task of helping students develop the life skills
necessary to maintain both one’s well-being and one’s individuality in
an increasingly complex and increasingly demanding society.

REFERENCES

page 84.

2. John G. Eriksen, “The Role of General Education in Developing
Competencies for a Changing World,” remarks to the College of
Arts and Sciences Annual Faculty Meeting, Bowling Green State
University, September 23, 1974.

3. The following thoughts are taken from a proposal prepared by
Gary Woditsch and myself for submission to the Fund for the Im­
provement of Post-Secondary Education regarding the creation of
a Competency-based Undergraduate Education Center on the
Bowling Green campus. (See p. 7 of this paper for a discussion of
the CUE Center.)


**Notes on Liberal Studies for Career-Oriented Students**

**By Carol J. Guardo**

Utica College of Syracuse University

Every college or university defines its approach to liberal studies for career-oriented students within the broader context of its own characteristics as an educational institution. The remarks which follow are thus based on my experiences and observations as the academic dean of Utica College. Utica College is not offered as a model, but rather as an exemplar of the small, private college serving approximately 1,500 full-time students which has asserted a dual commitment to liberal arts and career-oriented curricular programs.

The two-fold educational commitment to the liberal arts tradition and career/professional studies emerged over the course of Utica Col-

* Remarks made at the A.G.L.S. meeting on October 18, 1974 were an extemporaneous presentation based on the major points outlined here.
lege's history. Its evolution is now at the point where approximately fifty percent of its students are majoring in liberal arts curricula and the other half of the student body majors in career-oriented curricula. The career/professional studies have emerged progressively in the fields of business, public service and allied health.

All of the curricular programs at Utica College incorporate a "core" requirement. The requirement has the objective of providing a liberal education base for the total curriculum. The core experience is based on fulfilling distribution requirements in written communication and four of six basic areas of knowledge, such as humanities and science.

The basic liberal education component is required of all students because the Utica College faculty subscribes to the educational philosophy that all learning should be based on a liberal education base. The core experience is aimed at the development of such fundamental skills as communication, conceptualization, critical analysis and problem-solving. These skills are thought to prepare students for the exercise of flexibility and adaptability in our changing society.

Just last year the faculty of Utica College reaffirmed its commitment to a liberal education base and this year has undertaken an extensive review of the core program with the hope of improving its content and substance. In the face of mounting pressure for professional training, the college is also seeking to maintain the balance between its liberal arts and career-oriented programs.

Other colleges have chosen to initiate programs of professional studies as a means of counteracting declining enrollments. Based on the almost thirty-year experience of Utica College, I would suggest that a college not embark on these curricular developments if they are contrary to the mission and identity of the college. I believe that Utica College has been successful in its balance of programs because it has had the dual commitment to liberal arts and career-oriented education since its inception as a branch college of Syracuse University in 1946. And from my perspective, the small, private college which will survive today's challenges and economic strains is that college which remains true to its mission and identity during the next few difficult years. The presumed first step for any college is, of course, the recognition and articulation of that mission and identity and then the deliberate commitment to them. In my judgment, that is the stuff of which a viable college is made.

For those of you who are considering the development of career-oriented curricula as an attraction to students, I offer the following cautions. These cautions are based on the notion that for every advantage which career/professional studies offer, there is a concomitant problem which must be addressed.

1. Many have cited the commitment of career-oriented students
as a plus. They are perceived as highly motivated, with direction, enthusiasm and dedication. This is often the case. However, because of their commitment to their future profession, they are often more dedicated to their major courses and need concentrated persuasion about the value of a liberal education base for their preferred course of studies.

2. Relatedly, career-oriented students are frequently described as having a strong esprit de corps because of their common goal-orientation. This is also often the case. However, placing these students in the perspective of the broader college community can be a problem. Career-oriented students (and sometimes also their faculty) may be estranged from their colleagues because their own in-group cohesiveness insulates them from a wider scope of exchange and interaction. Optimistically, the common liberal education experiences assist students in bridging the communication gaps which may develop between career-oriented programs and the rest of the college community.

3. Another attraction of career-oriented programs is that they will be high demand, high enrollment programs because they lead to assured job placements for graduating students. On the other hand, the average college graduate will go through several job changes throughout the course of his or her professional career. New occupational situations not anticipated by present-day training will arise and others which now abound with job opportunities will decline. Students need to be prepared for this kind of reality, one which seems to require that they experience a more broadly based education in college.

4. There is indeed strong demand on the part of incoming students for certain career/professional programs of study. How long the interest pattern will persist is problematic. We have all experienced the seduction of fantasies about bringing in numbers of students by creating certain curricular programs. And in these fantasies, concerns about costs, points of diminishing return, long-term versus short-term attractiveness, the space and resource demands involved have not been fully addressed. In closing, I would simply suggest that these fantasies need to be tempered by the reality of the institutional mission and objectives of your own particular college or university before decisions about new liberal or career-oriented curricular directions are made.