General Education as an Alternative to Liberal Education: Some Dissenting Views

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At a time in the development of higher education when colleges and universities are competing for students by appealing almost solely to student requests for job-related training, a discussion of alternative approaches to pre-professional training may appear anachronistic. However, this ascendent vocationalism has actually contributed to an expanding dialogue on the meaning of general education. Those of us disturbed by the deemphasis of general education on most campuses have become increasingly self-conscious about the content and quality of our general education offerings. If we are going to maintain a flourishing general education component in higher education, we must present a convincing case that it is at least as valuable as accounting or computer science in satisfying personal objectives. Students and legislatures are no longer willing to provide support for general education simply because a coterie of professional educators voice persistent praise of its merits. These merits must now be made explicit and be defended on clear grounds of practicality. Vague statements about the purpose and form of general education contribute ammunition to those who would prefer to see general education confined to educational museums.

Raymond Kolcaba's recent attempt in Perspectives to distinguish between general education and liberal education reflects one approach to pre-professional education. His description of general education is based on certain assumptions about the purpose of higher education as well as the
classroom method and evaluation procedures appropriate for im-
plementing this proposed purpose:

1. Self-knowledge acquired experientially is a more appropriate focus for general education than is vicarious learning about other cultures or alternative modes of thinking;
2. Individual student value systems are coherent enough to provide an impetus for a productive general education curriculum; and
3. Self-evaluation of academic performance is desirable.

We disagree with the strict individualism implicit in his preferred form of general education. Surely there is something contradictory about attempting to provide at the same time (1) an educational experience which will emphasize student choice of objectives and evaluative norms and (2) a curriculum which will provide the basis for an effective life of work and leisure. We do students a disservice when we teach them the delight of self-motivation and self-evaluation unless we also teach them the importance of such non-individualistic processes as conflict resolution, collective decision making, community cooperation, and systems of coercion. How well we understand these latter concepts has a major effect on our tolerance of other people and their behavior and on our effectiveness in working with or against employees, supervisors, friends, relatives, or any other group with which one typically interacts. Kolcaba’s approach strikes us as well-intentioned and radical. These are advantages, but we fear that a graduate of his proposed curriculum would be neither able to cope with the hierarchical nature of almost any employment situation nor would he or she be prepared to act as a change agent in a diverse community. This paper will focus on a few of our specific reasons for partially rejecting Kolcaba’s suggestions.

Kolcaba is correct when he states that it is unnecessary for schools to adopt a role as either training centers for cogs in a given social system or support systems for maximum personal growth. Yet Kolcaba’s proposal strikes us as committing the very mistake he deplores. His variant of general education is oriented almost totally toward “nurturing individuals.” This is a worthwhile purpose but how does it prepare students for the world of compromise, inequity, coalition, and occasional personal failure which most of us encounter daily? Lest we not be misunderstood we believe that students should be trained how to make independent judgments and to cope with change through personal adaptation. However, this process of individual decisionmaking and adaptation takes place in a social context in which others have rights and powers which must at least be recognized. Social change or growth cannot be sustained in a heterogeneous environment if each citizen demands the type of autonomy Kolcaba wishes to encourage. This is surely an unfortunate reality, but those of us interested in the growth of general education cannot divorce ourselves from the responsibility of equipping our students for a very imperfect world. We
should neither applaud nor ignore the imperfections when we design a
general education program.

Kolcaba recommends that students’ educational objectives predominate
over those of teachers in a humane general education program. While
agreeing more with this recommendation when applied to professional
education, we see the idea of a student-directed curriculum as particularly
inappropriate for general education. Those undergraduates with whom we
are familiar are particularly inept at choosing from among general
education options. Since they are familiar with few if any of the standard
disciplines and are even less familiar with specific cognitive and affective
skills, how can they make a meaningful choice about which general
education alternatives will help them attain what Kolcaba calls “full
personhood?” This is an important difference between Kolcaba’s form of
general education and what we propose. We join with him in condemning
mastery of course subject matter as the primary student goal and in
preferring an emphasis on skills which will be of creative use to future
citizens. However, as heretical as it may sound to some, we argue that
instructors must accept the final responsibility for defining which skills the
student will be encouraged to adopt. If teachers do not design the
curriculum explicitly, one of two unacceptable practices will result—either
students will be manipulated into making pre-determined “choices” in an
atmosphere of pseudo-freedom or students will make choices of educational
experiences based on little more than whim. Clearly, our suggested form of
general education is based on our lack of confidence in the ability of un­
dergraduates to make final curriculum choices from among areas with
which they are unfamiliar.

Another problem which we have with Kolcaba’s student-directed form
of general education is its inevitable discouragement of personal discipline
and consequent hard-earned accomplishment. In our collective experience
of 15 years as learners and instructors in the area of general education we
have been impressed by the difficulty most students experience in acquiring
general education skills. For example, discovering alternative inferences
which could be drawn from a group of data requires a great amount of time
and mental effort. Where are the freshmen and sophomores who would
voluntarily exert themselves that strenuously in a general education
framework? As unpalatable as it may be to some instructors, they must
provide the leadership necessary to induce the quantity and quality of work
which will make general education a rewarding component of higher
education. Since self-directed learners are not being produced in enormous
numbers by our elementary and secondary school systems, how can we
expect most beginning undergraduates to transcend their previous school
experiences without conscious direction from someone more familiar with
general education options? At minimum, those who design and implement
general education curricula should inform students about which learning
experiences are essential for attaining student-selected learning outcomes.
In that way a student could define the broad purpose of his or her learning,
but the paths toward that purpose would be determined by those in the college or university who possess knowledge about the relationship between particular curriculum options and their learning outcomes. Students do need to learn independence from teachers, but we disagree with Kolcaba’s apparent assumption that typical beginning undergraduates possess the skills that transform such independence from self-indulgence into responsible autonomy.

Another area of disagreement we have with Kolcaba’s form of general education is its failure to address the question of quality. There are many ways to create an “educational” experience which students will enjoy. However, what distinguishes a college from an amusement park is a concern for intellectual growth. Growth of any type implies change. We are skeptical of claims that personal growth has occurred without some attempt to substantiate or measure the claims. At the time when “personal growth” is used as glibly as it now is, surely our skepticism is justifiable. Whatever form general education takes on a particular campus, its reputation as a facilitator of intellectual development must be founded on evidence that growth occurs. Such substantiation requires evaluation, and while self-evaluation is often interesting it cannot provide the basis for exporting a curriculum. It is just too easy to say “I have grown.” Skeptical outside evaluators may sometimes reject too quickly an educational innovation, but at least they do not have their own egos pushing them in the direction of lavish praise simply because they themselves were the ones who were supposed to be learning.

Our major criticism of Kolcaba’s view of general education is its vagueness. Many of his 50 points are humane and reasonable but they are the type of contentions which almost everyone will support in the abstract. However, polymorphous implementation formats exist, each with different implications and costs. Before we can react any more fully to Kolcaba’s vision we would need to know what he means by such concepts as “student process,” “skill mastery,” “self knowledge,” and a “whole-person point of view.” These are all concepts the names of which we all endorse, but what do they mean? Only after their meanings have been specified can we be sure if we wish more of them.

In an attempt to stimulate further communication about the meaning of general education we would like to mention our preferences. The content of our ideal form of general education would consist of skills, not units of factual content. Specifically, we would emphasize three types of skills: (1) application of alternative paradigms within the standard disciplines, (2) critical thinking and (3) the analysis of moral dilemmas. These skills are uniquely appropriate for general education because (a) they are required in daily decisionmaking situations and (b) university faculty members do possess some expertise in these skills. Many other skills have one of the two characteristics, but we can think of no others which fulfill both criteria. Certainly there are other skills which are useful to a thoughtful and creative
citizen, but colleges and universities should not promise to provide learning outcomes better acquired on the job.

In our ideal form of general education, course topics or module subjects are incidental. Faculty members should instruct and students should learn about those topics which are mutually interesting. However, the faculty have the responsibility for identifying those generic skills which students require to meet societal obligations and contribute to future change. The reason for assigning this responsibility to faculty, rather than students, is clear. Faculty have had an opportunity to see the results of alternative educational choices. Certainly, we would not suggest that faculty members have a peculiarly well-refined collective judgment. Our point is a simple one. Students cannot be expected to make reasonable decisions when choosing from among alternative general education options because they know little about the relationship between higher education inputs and their resultant outcomes.