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AGLS AND GENERAL EDUCATION

REFLECTIONS BY THE PRESIDENT

A. J. Carlson

The Association for General and Liberal Studies serves as "a forum for professional people concerned with undergraduate general and liberal education in each of the several divisions of the curriculum." At least, that is what the Bylaws indicate. But as I talk to people about the organization several more specific questions keep emerging: "What exactly is AGLS anyway?" "Why should I spend $10 a year to support AGLS?" "What is Interdisciplinary Perspectives?" These questions suggest that the Association has as its first problem — to use the current jargon — a very large "communication gap."

First, AGLS does have some history: founded on the campus of Michigan State University in 1961, its genesis came from those people involved in undergraduate university or college teaching who took seriously the task of introducing students to significant intellectual questions which reached across discipline boundaries. Immediately, though, other questions arose among its members as to the relationship of liberal education vis-a-vis general education. Were these broad questions incorporated only in a required sequence? Would only interdisciplinary or lower-division courses suffice? How vocationally focussed should such courses be? The answers here came in the incorporation statement: AGLS "represents no particular doctrine or dogma other than the firm conviction that a good general education is one of the signs of liberally educated men and women."
These questions, nonetheless, have continued to be raised during the entire life of the Association. They ordinarily emerge at the annual fall meeting of AGLS, held in a different part of the country each year. Most recently, we have been hosted at Michigan State University, 1974, Middle Tennessee State, 1975, Boston University, 1976, Weber State College (Ogden, Utah), 1977. The host institution is asked to provide the theme based on its own commitment to our broadest interests in interdisciplinary teaching: Weber State’s theme for October 27-29, 1977 will be, “General Education: Diversity by Design.” Once again, the suggestion of diversity headlines a national meeting called to bring people together. Similar diverse reflections also emerge in the spring section meeting of AGLS which is held in Chicago in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Association for Higher Education. As AAHE sets its larger conference theme, this Association strives to find a complementary topic which bears on general education’s relationship to the particular AAHE theme.

So, in the first instance, AGLS is an association which brings people together twice each year who want to talk about the difficulties of teaching undergraduates — and one must admit that these days there are not many professional associations that are willing to talk only about the difficulties of teaching undergraduates. Yet, people do ask, is such an effort worth the annual dues?

In a period of tight budgets brought on by even tighter inflation, commitment to memberships is always a question. AGLS does provide two printed journals which encourage contributions from the membership: Interdisciplinary Perspectives is currently published at Boston University, where the College of Basic Studies has long been practicing the virtues of what many of us preach: a series of truly team-taught courses for the first two undergraduate years. Its dean and faculty, including our journal’s editor, are passionately committed to asking vital questions which link communications skills together for both the verbal and quantifiable disciplines. Anyone who has not seen a CBS team of five faculty teaching together in the basic college program perhaps has not caught the true vitality of general education.

On an even larger scale, Michigan State University provides the entire membership with the University College Quarterly, which ranges along a wide educational horizon, from incisive articles about interdisciplinary teaching to brief dashes of verse. At the recent March meeting of the AGLS Executive Committee, Bruce M. McCrone accepted responsibility for reviving the AGLS Newsletter which will go to all members four times a year — four times, that is, if each of us is willing to send McCrone or the regional editor (to be announced in the first issue due out this spring) information concerning our own general education efforts. Three publications for one association is not a bad bargain for faculty or administrators who wish to stay informed as to what their colleagues are doing in interdisciplinary education across the entire nation.

It would seem, then, that in AGLS we have a skeletal network of people who come together twice a year and who talk to each other through a variety of publications. The final question remains, though, what is the glue that holds this organization together? For a concise statement of both the history and current status of general education, I would commend the monograph by Earl J. McGrath, General Education and the Plight of the Modern World.* Dr. McGrath provides us with a summary of general education programs, past and present, from the “biggies” at Columbia, Harvard and Chicago, to current programs at

*Available through the Lilley Endowment, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1976.
Kenyon, North Central, St. Joseph’s, Stanford, Kentucky, Wisconsin-Green Bay. Midway in his study, however, McGrath tries to face general education’s own current plight. He writes about the role of such courses in the processes of change in society:

If education is to discharge its responsibility in this situation, it must help our people to identify the existing matters of concern, supply them with the most creditable knowledge related to their proper treatment, cultivate the habits of reasoning that lead to sound conclusions and courses of action, and invest the whole process of education with a consideration of the values that properly applied in dealing equitably with bewildering human situations will enhance the conditions of life for this and future generations.*

Other academic associations would certainly accept most of Dr. McGrath’s statement — identifying common problems, applying current information/knowledge, even cultivating “habits of reasoning.” Where general or liberal education makes its own peculiar mark, I would argue, comes in McGrath’s latter emphasis on consideration of the values which subfuse our entire human situation. Value consciousness can indeed be simply another loaded shibboleth. But for faculty who take the commitments of AGLS seriously, an understanding of human values in both their individual and social context places a high responsibility on that faculty person. The student, indeed, becomes a person rather than an object; the underpinning of the course becomes, not the professor’s own interests, but the integrity of the material as defined by one’s colleagues in the course design — interdisciplinary teaching banishes all niceties of selfish intellectual gamesmanship; the aim of this teaching becomes an honest interchange as to the essence of significant questions which are chosen, as McGrath suggests, from “existing matters of concern.”

Whether such courses be structured around contemporary or historical concerns (McGrath prefers major contemporary social issues or problems of our own times), I find less compelling. There is some virtue in beginning with the past simply to achieve what President Hutchins has called “critical distance” in order to reach the present in a more meaningful manner. After twenty years of designing such courses, I would argue that courses in general education must attach to their contemporaneity: 1) a sense of our own heritage, 2) an encounter with significant primary writings, 3) an opportunity to write cogently about seminal works, primary or secondary in nature, 4) an environment in which direct verbal exchange can take place to insure that the students’ own value system has been brought into dialogue. In many instances for freshmen, such courses are the very first opportunity a college student may have had to answer the question: “Why do you believe what you have just said?”

Emphasis on both the cognitive concern for a reasoned explication of why a student accepts some idea and a more affective realization that concern for human values does involve the students’ “feelings” are each important aspects for general education. Studies in the traditional liberal arts, from the medieval university to date, have always had as their primary goal, a commitment to freedom of the mind and the spirit through rigorous academic pursuit in specified discipline areas. General education too often allows itself to be taunted by the epithet “generalist,” as though the depth of the discipline could not be equally balanced by the breadth of encounter from equidistant vantage points of several disciplines.

*Ibid., p. 52.
With Earl McGrath, however, I am suggesting that the confusion of our own times calls for a synthesis of human concerns with human values. Students do respond to course efforts which begin with their own autobiography and draw deliberate comparisons between past cultures and our contemporary problems. Such comparisons are always fraught with the danger of oversimplification, or wishful thinking, which must be monitored by a professor who does, indeed, have something to "profess." He or she is first and foremost a human being whose own value systems should become a living reality to his students rather than sounding brass or tinkling cymbals. Second, the professor combines the rigor of his own discipline (or disciplines) with those of his colleagues. He is not afraid to say, "I don't know; go ask Professor Smith." The concern of general education, thus, is never taught in the vacuum of a single class or a single contemporary situation. The course is always part of a larger design which must be carefully constructed by each separate institution.

No college can simply re-create the Harvard Redbook or the University of Chicago's Great Books course. Syllabi from other institutions always should be examined carefully to see how others "do it." But the essence of a good general education course is that, once the reviews are completed, a group of committed generalists (plus one or two unbelievers, to keep us honest!) must meet together and carve out the course. Endless meetings are the fate of such designs, because it is in the very design that the character and substance of the model is achieved. The reading materials are significant, but there is an almost limitless amount of material; what is vital is that the human dimension, the core of values which lie beneath the model, is allowed to intrude into such courses. Teaching thereby becomes a process of identifying the effect which our ideas and values have upon the human condition. The process is at once very general and also quite specific. The teacher now becomes more of a resource than simply another expert. Rewards for such teaching cease to be on the grade point average, and become instead the encounter with students concerning both the past as well as the course's implications for the present and future. The Association for General and Liberal Studies invites faculty with similar interests to join with us in continuing to maintain such conversations.