

Administration of General Education: The Tragedy of the Commons

By Rob Mauldin, Director of General Education, Shawnee State University and John Hinni, Dean Emeritus, School of University Studies, Southeast Missouri State University

Abstract

We claim that a general education program is an academic commons and, as such, has considerable potential for neglect and misuse. An administrator, with general education as his or her primary responsibility, is able to protect and promote an effective general education program.

Introduction

Three problems are typical of general education programs: absence of ownership, misuse of the program, and a lack of understanding by students, faculty, and staff. This paper is an attempt to document the need for an administrator with primary responsibility for the oversight of an institution's general education program so that these three problems are diminished. As stated by Jerry Gaff in *General Education Then and Now: What's New Today* (1997), the "mandate of an office to assure that the curriculum has integrity may be the single most important reason that general education and its improvement continues as an important agenda, even as times change" (p. 9). After a brief review of the literature, we begin with what, we think, is a powerful analogy that makes the argument for an administrator of general and liberal education. Then, we provide a detailed list of proposed responsibilities of such an administrator. For the sake of this paper, we use the terms general education and liberal education interchangeably. Also, we use the term administrator while recognizing that a wide range of employees, from full-time faculty to full-time administrators, has administrative responsibility for general education.

Background

A search of the literature revealed few references regarding the administration of general education. In 1970, Jay Stein, then Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Western Illinois University, wrote an article in the *Journal of Higher Education* entitled "Administering Liberal-General Education for All Students." Stein pointed out that departments tend to give priority to majors at the expense of providing a quality general education for non-majors. In this same paper, Stein outlines two basic theories regarding the administration of general education. One theory advocates a separate school or college for general education while another theory contends that general education can be "organized and prescribed quite independently of administrative structure" (p. 454). We disagree with the notion that general

education can be delivered effectively without some sort of administrative structure. In "To Proliferate But to Educate" (1970), Stein suggests that the proliferation of departments on university campuses often ignores the "purposes of liberal-general education" (p. 217). Janzow, Hinni, and Johnson, in "Administering the Curriculum" (Gaff and Ratliff's *Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum*, 1996), suggest irony in the fact that even though general education is the largest program on campus, often without any sort of administrative structure, the smallest department on campus is supported by a department chair, a budget, and a dedicated faculty. The extent of the absence of leadership of the general education program is noted in Jerry Gaff's *New Life for the College Curriculum* (1991, p. 169). Based on a survey, Gaff reported that 40% of higher education institutions deliver general education programs without a person who has administrative responsibility for the program as a whole.

One regional accrediting body has sided with those demanding some sort of administrative structure for general education. Cecilia Lopez (1999), Associate Director of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, evaluated team reports of accreditation visits by North Central and found that these teams "commented that visible administrative guidance and institutional support are necessary for the effectiveness of the general education program in institutions of any size" (p. 48). According to Lopez, accreditation teams concluded that there was a "lack of institutional support" when "there was no faculty member or academic administrator appointed to be in charge of the program's daily operation" (p. 48).

Tragedy of the Commons: An Analogy

In *The Tragedy of the Commons* (1968), Garrett Hardin uses the metaphor of common grazing land surrounding an English village in the Middle Ages to illustrate a natural tragedy. Hardin argues that it is to the advantage of an English farmer to add more cows to the common land since he receives almost all of the gain from each cow, yet the damage done to the pasture is shared by all users. In short, there is a natural tendency to overuse a commons because the benefits to the individual are always greater than the losses. In a 1971 film based upon the paper, Hardin states that "we must give up some freedoms in order to keep others of more value," meaning that we must give up some of the individual's gain in order to preserve the commons. We contend that departments must give up some freedoms regarding the general education curriculum and its administration in order to enhance the quality of an institution's general education program for the sake of all students on campus.

We believe that *The Tragedy of the Commons* applies to general education programs in academic institutions. Since all baccalaureate students enroll in general education programs, a case can be made that general education is an academic commons. Since departments in the arts and sciences typically offer the bulk of the courses in general education programs, the administration of these programs will be the responsibility of academic deans and chairpersons unless a general education administration is firmly in place. It is to the advantage of individual departments to overuse general education by seeking more and more of the student credit hours produced, by increasing class sizes in general education courses, by staffing general education courses with part-time faculty and teaching assistants, and by using general education courses as preparation for their majors. As described by Gaff in *New Life for the College Curriculum* (1991), the absence of an administrative structure for general education "maintains the power of departments over general education and virtually guarantees that the curriculum will be fragmented and lack coherence" (p. 26). As a result, everyone shares the damage done to general education programs and their users (students). It is a tragedy.

Proposed Responsibilities of Administrators of General Education Programs

In Jerry Gaff's *General Education Today* (1988), he refers to David Unumb's defined roles of administrators of general education as: an agent of change, facilitator, ombudsman, and advocate. We certainly agree with these roles, but would like to expand upon them by providing a detailed list of typical responsibilities that we view as crucial to the success of general education.

Having advanced this position, we describe fifteen responsibilities that a general education administrator should address. These responsibilities can be separated into three categories.

I. PROGRAM ADVOCACY

In this category, we include involvement in institutional strategic planning, articulation of program purposes, ensuring program coherence, governance, and student advising. These five responsibilities include work that should be on the routine agenda of any individual responsible for an academic program. However, without an administrator of general education, mixed messages are certain to prevail and the idea and the ideals of liberal education will not be a part of the institutional agenda.

1. Institutional Strategic Planning

General education is central to the mission of an institution of higher learning. However, the rampant specialization of knowledge in recent times often translates into a higher priority being given to planning new degree

programs. It is common practice for institutions to add new degree programs without the elimination of existing degree programs and without additional resources. In such instances, the slices of the curricular pie become thinner and general education is at risk.

Institutional strategic planning requires attention to staffing patterns. At Shawnee State University, a relatively young four-year institution with about 3500 students, a total of 204 new courses were created from 1990 to 2000, 146 of which were at the 300 and 400 level. While new courses were to be expected as SSU developed new four-year degree programs in its transition from a community college, the number of faculty members increased slightly from 106 to 112. With an increasing number of courses and a relatively constant number of faculty members, the staffing of lower-level general education courses shifted toward adjunct faculty members. It has been our experience that curriculum committees typically act as rubberstamps for departments, not asking difficult questions regarding resources when new courses are proposed. An administrator of general education is in a position to ask these tough questions so that general education does not suffer as a result of new courses and degree programs.

2. Articulate Purposes of General Education to Students, Public, Faculty, and Administration

The goals of general education are not immediately obvious to many constituencies on a college campus. Faculty members tend to know little about the institution's general education program even though faculty members advise students and teach courses in general education. It is important that the public realizes that a university is dedicated to the goal of educating, not just training for an entry-level job. Administrators need to be reminded that strong general education programs bring vitality and community to institutions. Students enter college focused on the major with the hope that the major will provide entry-level career positions. Many students are unaware of the reasons why they are being asked to take general education courses. In fact, many students resent requirements in general education. Students should receive a thorough introduction, via an extended orientation and a freshman seminar, to the fact that general education has professional and philosophical value that will benefit them in many aspects of their lives. Stated objectives in syllabi of general education courses can help to explain further the goals of general education. Students need to be informed of statistics regarding the average number of times that a student changes major as well as the average number of times that a college graduate changes careers. Many students are not aware of what employers would like to see in their employees, much of which is consistent with the goals of general education (see National Association of Colleges and Employers, *Planning Job Choices 2001*). An administrator of general education can disseminate the goals of general education through the

student newspaper, the student government association, a web page, and awards for student achievement in the program.

3. Coherence of the Program

It is important for a general education program to be more than a group of unrelated courses. Typical approaches to promoting the coherence of a program focus on intellectual skills, ways of knowing, personal development, and content (*Strong Foundations*, 1994, pp. 13-17). An administrator of general education is able to work with a campus-wide general education committee in order to ensure that the program is a coherent unit. In *Strong Foundations* (1994), the writers state that “if the curriculum is designed to cultivate specific knowledge and skills among students, and if we aspire to curricular coherence, greater coordination is essential” (p. 37). Jerry Gaff, in *General Education Then and Now: What’s New Today* (1997), adds that “if a general education program is designed to be coherent, then an administrative structure must be in place to actively foster coherence. It is not something that happens magically all by itself” (p. 7). This is an ongoing task since many universities review existing courses on a regular basis in order to make sure that stated program objectives are met. By focusing on the needs of every student on campus, general education administrators are in an excellent position to create connections among disparate sectors of the university.

We believe that it is very difficult for a course to wear two hats, i.e., to serve the goals of general education and the major simultaneously. Boyer and Levine, in *A Quest for Common Learning: The Aims of General Education* (1981) called the nation’s attention to the poor state of general education when they stated that “general education is the spare room of academia with no one responsible for its oversight and everyone permitted to use it as he will” (p. 3). Left unchecked, departments will use general education to serve their own ends, much like Hardin describes in *The Tragedy of the Commons*. Cecilia Lopez (1999) echoes this concern by stating that accreditation review teams “rejected ‘general education’ programs in departments that develop general education courses that are, in fact, preparatory courses for upper division department majors” (p. 50). One of the most important responsibilities of an administrator of general education is not to allow departments to use general education for the sake of their own majors. An administrator of general education should remind departments that most of the students in these introductory courses are not going to major in those fields and to attempt to prepare them for further study within those disciplines misses an opportunity to introduce students to ways of knowing, dispositions, and skills that are crucial to both the discipline and the general education experience.

4. Governance

The person charged with the administrative task of directing the program is a logical person to chair a campus-wide general education committee and promote that committee's role in the governance process of the university. The general education committee typically reviews the program on a regular basis, plans and reviews the assessment of stated learning outcomes of the program, and approves proposed changes to the program.

5. Advising

Advising plays a key role in the communication of the aims of general education to students. However, most advising programs require that faculty members advise students even though many faculty members are not aware of the curriculum, policies, and procedures of the general education program. A systematic advising program is crucial in order to advise students regarding general education, particularly in the first year in which most of the courses taken by students are general education courses. This kind of effort requires continuing professional development for faculty and staff and should involve an administrator of general education.

II. LOGISTICS

This category includes scheduling and sequencing of courses, preparing reports and updating the institutional catalog, participating in faculty promotion and tenure procedures, participating in hiring and staffing decisions, providing assessment information and data to faculty and staff, and addressing transfer and course substitution issues. The general education administrator who addresses these six tasks will be able to ensure that the general education program is not misused and that the focus of the institution is directed toward the needs of students as opposed to the needs of departments.

6. Sequencing and Scheduling of General Education Courses

Some courses must be taken in the freshman year, e.g., freshman composition, and thus must be offered via many sections on a regular basis. Other courses may be taken at any point in the student's schedule and can be offered less frequently and with fewer sections. The general education administrator should be responsible for providing this type of information to department chairs and faculty as they create schedules.

7. Catalog, Annual Reports, and Historical Record

The administrator of general education, since he or she coordinates changes to the general education curriculum, is in the best position to update the catalog with changes from one edition to the next. Also, the administrator of general education is able to establish an historical record for the program,

including copies of proposals, annual reports, publications, assessment data, etc.

8. Faculty Promotion and Tenure

Teaching general education courses takes a considerable amount of the faculty's time, especially if the courses emphasize writing and critical thinking. Also, teaching evaluations are typically lower in general education courses, which is an important consideration in promotion and tenure decisions. An administrator of general education can provide a much-needed voice advocating participation in general education as a key element in the promotion and tenure process. Letters of support should be written on behalf of faculty members who have worked hard to improve the teaching/learning process in the program, in spite of considerable resistance from students. A teaching award in general education can promote the involvement of faculty members in the program.

9. Hiring and Staffing

In order for general education to be a long-term priority of the institution, it is important to hire faculty members and administrators who support the goals of general education. Faculty members need to be hired with the expectation that part of the teaching load will include general education courses. Candidates for administrative positions should be screened carefully for their understanding of and support for general education. Members of campus-wide general education committees, with the guidance and support of the general education administrator, can be of great service in these matters.

Unfortunately, the phenomenon described by Kanter, et al. (1997) happens too frequently on university campuses: "At one campus, when too few faculty volunteered to teach the department's general education courses, the department chair assigned this duty to department members who were unwilling, unprepared, or unenthusiastic about teaching them" (p. 93). Generally, department chairs and faculty determine teaching assignments of general education courses. The person in charge of the general education program should be aware of guidelines of regional accrediting bodies for the credentials of faculty teaching general education courses and should disseminate those guidelines to appropriate administrators. In addition, a person who is responsible for general education is in an excellent position to staff unique components of the program, such as freshman seminars, senior seminars, and interdisciplinary courses.

10. Assessment

As discussed by Field and Lee (1986), "the very process of engaging in certain types of evaluation, if carefully planned and publicized on campus,

can both provide a crucial catalyst for change in general education and also reduce resistance to change" (p. 12). Departments and the typical curriculum committee do not have the time or the inclination to assess the general education program as a whole. Lopez (1998) recommended that institutions "provide sorely needed leadership in systematically assessing student learning across the general education curriculum" (p. 43).

11. Adjustments to General Education Requirements: Transfers and Substitutions

Institutional general education requirements are adjusted by transferring courses from other institutions and by substituting courses taken at the same institution for general education requirements. While a department chair is often the best judge of whether a particular course matches another, a person in charge of the general education program is better able to make sure that the course addresses the goals of the institution's general education program. An administrator of general education should participate in the development of guidelines used for substitutions and the application of transfer credits.

In many cases, the transfer of general education credits is handled at the state level. An administrator of general education for an institution has a unique perspective on the program and is ideally suited to serve at the state level. The curriculum is constantly changing and an administrator of general education can preserve the coherence of general education amidst an increasingly mobile student population.

III. POLITICAL ISSUES

A general education administrator's duties in this category include faculty development, attempts to check the growth of majors, addressing professional accreditation mandates, and providing information about national issues in general education. Given that faculty tend to be hired, rewarded, promoted, and tenured for expertise in their disciplines, it follows that teaching and scholarly activity in general education will not always be foremost in faculty values. An individual responsible for the general education program will tend to ensure that information about general education is available to all parts of the campus community and that students, faculty, and administrators have access to relevant information.

12. Faculty Development

In order to provide faculty with an understanding of the institution's general education program, a strong orientation and continuing faculty development are essential. Scholarship in general education can re-orient the focus of

faculty to the importance of the teaching and learning process. Faculty development funds can be used for a variety of initiatives, including:

- Development of courses that emphasize writing, critical thinking, information literacy, and interdisciplinary content
- Scholarship in general education, including grant-writing and publishing
- Orientation for new faculty members
- Continuing education and regular workshops
- Library materials in support of interdisciplinary and seminar components of the program
- More effective incorporation of general education goals in courses

13. Curriculum: A Check on the Expansion of the Major

Since the appearance of the major at Johns Hopkins University in 1878 (Gaff's *Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum*, 1996, p. 72), the major has become synonymous with the university experience. A study of university catalogs over the past several decades reveals a proliferation of courses in the major in many degree programs. Elective credits have been replaced by courses required for the major, general education has been reduced, and total hours are increasing to the point that many baccalaureates cannot be completed reasonably in four years. Stein, in "To Proliferate But to Educate" (1970) thinks that with such rigid curricula, "The student builds himself into intellectual and occupational confinement if he follows a set of inflexible departmental prescriptions with limited transferability to another field of learning" (p. 221). If electives exist, Stein noted "every elective must be screened carefully for relevance to the major" (p. 221). Professional accrediting bodies have reinforced the primacy of the major. Proposals for additional requirements in degree programs are often justified by the purported requirements of professional accrediting bodies. Curriculum committees seldom question such claims. An administrator of general education should keep files of requirements of professional accrediting bodies, question the proliferation of requirements of the major, and shift the burden of proof to those who propose additional requirements in majors.

14. Professional Accreditation, Regional Accreditation, and Program Review

For the sake of professional accrediting bodies in their review of academic programs, having one individual as the source of reference for the institution's general education program is useful. Regional accrediting bodies have expectations regarding general education as well, and an administrator of general education can write reports, visit with reviewers, and represent the program. Finally, many campuses maintain a regular cycle of external review for their general education programs. The external

review of general education needs an administrator of general education to write a self-study report, coordinate the campus visit, disseminate the report, act on recommendations, and develop long-term relationships with the reviewers. (In fact, this paper is the result of a relationship that was established as a result of two people who met during an external review of a general education program!)

15. National Issues and Scholarship in General Education

There are now a variety of publications and national organizations in existence to serve as resources for general education. An effective general education administrator will access information and journals from national and regional organizations, attend meetings, present papers, and publish them. This level of scholarly involvement ensures that the institutional program is consistent with national trends. Perhaps more importantly, such scholarly activity will result in a higher level of respect for general education on the part of faculty who are active scholars in their respective disciplines.

Accreditation mandates, assessment activities, and institutional planning all depend on the documentation of student learning outcomes available through research in general education. Such information should be promulgated to faculty to ensure appropriate teaching strategies are maintained.

Conclusion

As an academic commons, we believe that a number of problems confront general education programs in institutions of higher education. Prominent among these problems are a lack of program ownership, misuse of the program and, especially, a lack of awareness about the idea and the ideals of a liberal education. We also believe that having a general education administrator in place with exclusive responsibility for the program (similar to an academic dean with exclusive responsibility for an institutional graduate program) tends to resolve these problems.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Susan Montavon, Administrative Secretary in the Office of the Provost at Shawnee State University, for reviewing this manuscript.

References

- Association of American Colleges. (1994). *Strong foundations: Twelve principles for effective general education programs*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges.
- Boyer, E.L. & Levine, A. (1981). *A quest for common learning: The aims of general education*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Field, M. & Lee, R. (1986). Evaluation in general education: An important catalyst for curricular reform at Bemidji State University. *Perspectives*, 16, 12-17.
- Gaff, J.G. (1997, February 20-22). Concept paper. AAC&U Meeting, San Antonio.
- Gaff, J.G. (1988). *General education today: A critical analysis of controversies, practices, and reforms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gaff, J.G., Ratliff, J.L., & Associates. (Eds.) (1996). *Handbook of the undergraduate curriculum: A comprehensive guide to purposes, structures, practices, and change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gaff, J.G. (1991). *New life for the college curriculum*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons. *Science*, 162, 1243-1248.
- Hardin, G. (1971). *The tragedy of the commons*. New York: Phoenix/BFA Film & Video.
- Kanter, S.L. et al. (1997). *Revitalizing general education in a time of scarcity: A navigational chart for administrators and faculty*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Lopez, C.L. (1998). Assessment of student learning. *Liberal Education*, Summer, 36-43.
- Lopez, C.L. (1999). General education: Regional accreditation standards and expectations. *Liberal Education*, Summer, 46-51.
- The job market for the class of 2001. *Planning Job Choices 2001*, pp. 19-26.

Stein, J.W. (1970). Administering liberal-general education for all students. *Journal of Higher Education*, 41, 450-462.

Stein, J.W. (1970). To proliferate but to educate. *College and University*, 45, 217-224.