SNOW COLLEGE

GENERAL EDUCATION

Snow College Strategic Plan White Paper

September 2013

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A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects.[1]

-- Robert Heinlein

History and Background

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), an organization representing institutions of higher education dedicated to *liberal education*, defines a *general education* as "[t]hat part of a liberal education curriculum that is shared by all students," regardless of major.[2] Receiving a general education assumes that all students can meet a common set of core competencies.

Historically a general education has been rooted in core academic areas: humanities, physical sciences, social sciences, biological sciences, and fine arts. In the early 1900s, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, the president of Harvard University, instituted a program that required all students to take introductory courses in those subject areas.[3] For each subject area, students choose from a list of classes to fill the given requirement. This model of general education goes by many different names, including the "distribution" or "Chinese menu" model (e.g. "choose two courses from list A and one course from list B," etc.).

Snow College has long used the distribution model for general education (GE). Significant changes were implemented 20 years ago, after statewide focus meetings determined that all students should move through two English courses, a math course, a history course, and a minimum number of other GE courses as chosen by each state institution. This relatively standardized approach facilitated statewide articulation agreements, which were instituted in the 1990s. These agreements assure students, who earn an Associate of Science (AS) or Associate of Arts (AA) degree at any Utah college, that they have fulfilled all lower-division GE requirements at any transfer institution in the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE).

Since the distribution model was adopted, the Snow College Curriculum Committee has addressed challenges to GE by making several changes: the number of credits required by students has increased, courses approved for GE credit have been added, and student-learning outcomes (SLOs) have been revised downward from an initial 27 to ten and finally to seven for an AS degree and eight for an AA degree.

Lessons Learned

Perceptions of GE. As the Snow College Curriculum Committee has addressed GE, the thought by many has been "We've got the job done now, and no one ever has to look at it again." This belief

[1] Robert A. Heinlein, *Time Enough for Love* (New York: Ace, 1973).

[2] AAC&U, "What is a 21st Century Liberal Education," AAC&U, last modified 2013, www.aacu.org/leap/what_is_liberal_education.cfm.

[3] Catherine M. Wehlburg, "Integrated General Education: A Brief Look Back," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, No. 121 (Spring 2010): 5, doi:10.1002/tl.383.

suggested that assessment and revision of GE was not important or necessary. Because of this attitude, Snow College has experienced some problems with GE:

- Most students do not understand the value of a general education, frequently commenting, "I'm just getting my 'generals' out of the way." Furthermore, some faculty members espouse the same belief and encourage students to "stay here long enough to get your 'generals' done."
- More and more students are arriving at college with many kinds of credits and do not need as many GE courses from on-campus instructors.
- Division among the faculty has occurred when one academic division attempts to add a course to the approved list of GE courses. Adding courses has created some fairly serious "turf wars" because academic divisions feel the need to protect their disciplines and to assert their indispensability in GE.

Development of Strong Courses. Conversely, changes in GE have been the impetus for the development of many strong courses, including PHSC 1000 (Interdisciplinary Physical Science), ENGL 2150 (Intellectual Traditions of the West: Ancient World), and ENGL 2160 (Intellectual Traditions of the West: Modern World). Furthermore, these changes have allowed for the retooling of some existing courses, making them more interdisciplinary. MATH 1030 (Quantitative Literacy) and almost all courses taught in the Honors program exemplify this trend.

Assessment. As the focus on assessment has become an important theme in higher education, efforts to demonstrate that students who have taken GE-listed courses have actually achieved corresponding learning outcomes has proven to be difficult. As one means of assessment, Snow College administers the College Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) exam every other year even though the state has elected not to use it. The exam measures whether the student has mastered the content of a course but not whether the student has acquired the skills that are necessary for major coursework, real-world experience, and career employment. A nationwide and statewide trend is to develop and use authentic forms of assessment in lieu of standardized testing. *Authentic assessment* determines whether the student has met the important skill-based SLOs. The electronic portfolio or ePortfolio is one tool of authentic assessment. Students place examples of their best work in an ePortfolio. The portfolio is a means for the student to demonstrate the achievement of a GE outcome and can be used as a "calling card" for the student as he or she transfers to a larger institution, applies to graduate programs, or seeks employment. Although the ePortfolio has its merits and is being adopted by other state institutions, it has not yet been integrated into our own assessment practices.

Within the last year, the Snow College GE Committee began to develop and implement an assessment tool that would help to determine if Snow College students perceive that they are meeting, throughout their coursework, each of the GE outcomes. This instrument is based on a model developed by St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. Students take the assessment as incoming freshmen and then repeat the assessment prior to graduation. This tool gauges student perceptions of the GE outcomes and whether they have met them. It asks students to see the importance of a general education and how *essential learning outcomes* cross disciplines. Because the tool has not yet been implemented widely, the GE Committee has limited data on its effectiveness.

GE Focus Group. This GE focus group, a part of the strategic planning task force, has heard from many stakeholders during the strategic planning process. Faculty members from all divisions have expressed an interest in looking at GE again. Almost all full-time faculty members teach GE courses, which suggests that they believe in the importance of a strong GE program. The feedback that this focus group has received indicates that most faculty members have a desire to move towards a more integrated GE model that meets the needs of students and the demands of employers.

National Trends

Value of Liberal Education. Nationwide, discussions about the value of a liberal education or general education specifically, are occurring in halls of higher education, in legislative chambers, and in corporate boardrooms. The rising cost of a college degree, the perception that many liberal arts degrees are "degrees to nowhere," and the demand for job-related skills have fueled this discussion. Because of these forces, many people, both inside and outside of higher education, have suggested the adoption of a market-based model for higher education. As one CEO argues, "I believe that we must get rid of general education requirements…Doing so would sharply reduce the credit hours required for a bachelor's degree and, as a result, reduce the cost of college and the amount of money borrowed by students."[4] In response to such arguments, the AAC&U launched a campaign entitled "Liberal Education and America's Promise" (LEAP). This initiative "champions the importance of twenty-first century liberal education."[5] LEAP identified four essential learning outcomes and corresponding knowledge and skills:

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Intellectual and Practical Skills, including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Personal and Social Responsibility, including

- Civic knowledge and engagement – local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Integrative and Applied Learning, including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

These outcomes are intended to be "practiced extensively across the curriculum," "anchored [in] real-world challenges," "focused [on] engagement with big questions, and "demonstrated through application."[6]

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[4] Jacob Ruytenbeek, "The Problems (and Solutions) of Higher Education," *The Blog*, The Huffington Post, last modified August 19, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jacob-ruytenbeek/how-to-make-education-more
-affordable_b_3744356.html.

[5] AAC&U, *Liberal Education and America's Promise*, AAC&U, last modified 2013, http://www.aacu.org/ leap/.

[6] AAC&U, "Essential Learning Outcomes," *Liberal Education and America's Promise*, AAC&U. Accessed August 27, 2013, http:// www.aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm.

Employer Demands. Despite the perception that a general education is unnecessary and insignificant, a survey of the nation's employers suggests otherwise. A 2013 survey conducted by Hart Research Associates found that 93% of employers expect their employees to have a broader range of skills and that those skills are more important than an undergraduate major. Additionally, 80% of those surveyed agree that a student, regardless of major, should acquire a broad base of knowledge in the liberal arts and the sciences.[7] Students who meet the LEAP essential learning outcomes are better prepared to succeed in a world where critical thinking, clear communication, and complex problem-solving is vital.

LEAP. The state of Utah became a LEAP state in 2009. As a result, the Snow GE Committee rewrote the College's GE outcomes, aligning them with the LEAP essential learning outcomes. The new GE outcomes were officially adopted in 2011. (For a list of Snow College's GE outcomes, see Appendix A.) However, those outcomes are not well addressed with the distribution model, since most of the outcomes are skill-based rather than content-based. Ideally, outcomes need to be addressed in multiple courses.

Assessment. Assessment is also driving this discussion. It is much more difficult to assess skills than content; however, authentic assessment of the GE program is a necessity in today's educational climate. GE programs are being revised so that this form of assessment can occur across a group or series of courses.

Strategic Themes

Although national trends indicate that many people do not appreciate the purpose, relevance, or value of a general education, Snow College sees value in a broad general education. As Robert Heinlein argues in the epigraph at the opening of this paper, all human beings should have a broad set of knowledge and skills. "Specialization," he notes, "is for insects." A GE program at Snow College should provide students with the broad knowledge and skills that will make them competitive and successful in a global economy. Research and discussions with stakeholders indicate that Snow College must direct significant attention to establishing a new GE model that is more than a repackaging of our current approach. A vibrant and dynamic GE program would help fulfill the three core themes of the College. Such a GE program would build upon its "tradition of excellence," would foster a "culture of innovation," and would provide an "atmosphere of engagement" for both students and faculty.

High-Impact Practices. To achieve a bold and vibrant GE program at Snow College, an emphasis on high-impact practices would need to occur. AAC&U has published two reports arguing students learn better when learning takes place in a high-impact environment. The most commonly reported advantages of high-impact practices include "higher grades, higher persistence rates, intellectual gains, greater civic engagement, increased tolerance for and engagement with diversity, and increased interaction with faculty and peers."[8] High-impact practices include first-year seminars and experience, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, undergraduate research, collaborative assignments and projects, diversity/global learning, service learning, internships, and capstone courses. For detailed a definition for each of these practices see Appendix B. Incorporation of some or all of these practices pushes toward a more integrative model of learning.

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[7] Hart Research Associates, *It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success,* AAC&U, April 2013, http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/2013_EmployerSurvey.pdf.

[8] AAC&U, *The LEAP Vision for Learning: Outcomes, Practices, Impact, and Employers' Views.* AAC&U. Accessed September 17, 2013. http://leap.aacu.org/toolkit/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/LEAP-Vision _ Summary.pdf.

Technology. In a largely digital age, technology has the potential to support and enhance a new model of general education. Students and state legislators have requested additional online course offerings and courses offered through Interactive Videoconferencing (IVC). Courses using these delivery methods are seen as a cost saving measure and as a means to broaden and increase the student population at Snow College. Students who otherwise would not be able to come to campus would still have access to a college education. Many integrative GE courses would be hybrid in nature as students would attend classes on campus but would also have considerable interaction with faculty and peers online. Other GE courses would be taught exclusively online or through IVC.

Diversity. Another theme that should be addressed in the examination and implementation of a new GE model is the need for greater diversity on campus. A new model would allow for the creation of more diverse course offerings. Cross-disciplinary, collaborative work among faculty generates a diversity of ideas and perspectives. Furthermore, as faculty develop and Snow College offers a broader and more diverse set of courses, students will be exposed to new ideas, asked to synthesize knowledge, and forced to use the skills they have developed in a more diverse and complex world.

Outcomes and Assessment. A new GE model will bring challenges as new learning outcomes and forms of assessment will be required. The AAC&U has developed a set of rubrics, titled VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education), that assess the LEAP essential learning outcomes and essential skills.[9] These rubrics could be used in their entirety or modified to fit the specific needs of Snow College's GE model. Furthermore, to insure that students receive the very best educational experience and gain the necessary knowledge and skills for upper-division and graduate course work or for career opportunities, standards of quality must be addressed in all forms (i.e. face-to-face, hybrid, online, or IVC) of course delivery.

Costs. The value of a general education versus preparation for a major or a career creates tension. In a zero-sum game (the size of the financial pie seems to be fixed), resources allocated to major's classes come at the expense of resources allocated to GE courses and initiatives, and vice versa. The mission of the College addresses both goals, but a balance must be achieved in resource allocation.

Options

As institutions of higher education address, assess, and modify their GE programs, they largely choose one of three general models: (1) a distribution or "Chinese menu" model, (2) an integrative model, or (3) a hybrid model that uses the distribution model with integrative features. These three models can be placed on a continuum with the distribution model and the integrative model being polar opposites. Hybrid models fall in between: some have more or less integrative elements than others (Figure 1).

Figure 1. General Education Continuum

While models typically fall into one of these three broad categories, an institution's GE program, regardless of the model, should be unique and "designed around [its] character, the strengths and interests of its faculty, and the needs of its students."[10]

[9] AAC&U, *VALUE: Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education*. AAC&U. Accessed September 18, 2013. http://aacu.org/value/rubrics/index.cfm.

[10] Jerry Gaff, "Avoiding the Potholes: Strategies for Reforming General Education," *Educational Record* 61, no. 4 (1980): 50.

Distribution/"Chinese Menu" Model. According to the AAC&U, in a survey of 433 institutions, 15% use only the distribution model for GE. This is the model that Snow College currently uses to deliver GE to students. For graduation, students must complete 36 credits of GE coursework in American institutions, math, fine arts, English, oral communication, physical education, humanities, social and behavioral science, physical science, and life science. Students completing an AA degree must also take a foreign language.

The distribution model affords students flexibility to determine the courses that they will take and the sequence in which they will take them. The latitude that the distribution model offers may create significant problems, most notably a failure to understand and appreciate a general education. When students move from course to course, often without direction, they may fail to see how knowledge is made and how ideas connect across disciplines. The areas of study are thought or believed to be self-contained. In a recent study, only 30% of institutions with distribution models say that their students understand the learning outcomes for GE.[11]

This model of GE works for most faculty members because of their familiarity with it. It is the model that they were trained under, and it is easy to follow and manage. Scheduling and workload issues can easily be resolved under the model. Moreover, the faculty likes the distribution model because it allows them to teach in their specialty, which, in turn, provides a sense of job security since their classes will always be needed and offered for GE credit. A common concern that some faculty express is that an innovative and integrative model of GE could create a scenario where students may not receive in-depth knowledge in particular areas.

Integrative Model. Integrative models of GE are, in many ways, a reaction to the overspecialization of higher education. These models first began appearing in the 1920s and 1930s with focus on contemporary issues, classical ideas, or great books. Today, only 18% of institutions use a fully integrative model.[12]

Integrative models typically feature a curriculum intentionally designed to help students make connections across courses, disciplines, and life experiences. The fully integrative model is championed by many private liberal arts colleges. These institutions typically do not have GE requirements or individual classes. As an example, The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington has replaced classes with "programs." Programs are centered on a single topic, are taught by faculty from across disciplines, and are 12-16 credits. For example, faculty from literature and the visual arts at Evergreen will teach a program on "Creativity and Diversity in American Culture: Art and Narrative in Response to Place."

The University of Utah has also implemented a pilot program that adheres to the integrative GE model. A student can choose from one of six options (Creativity and Community, Global Citizenship, Sustainability, Art and Science, Entrepreneurship and Society, Medical Humanities) and complete all of their GE requirements in two semesters.

In studying a single topic across multiple disciplines, students are asked to see and make connections in their education. Fully-integrative models, however, do not always account for the transfer student. Furthermore, they also require a considerable amount of faculty buy in and staff support.

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[11] Hart Research Associates, Trends and Emerging Practices in General Education, *AAC&U*, May 2009, http://www.aacu.org/membership/documents/ 2009MemberSurvey Part2.pdf, 13.

[12] Ibid, 3.

Hybrid Models. According to the AAC&U, 64% of all higher education institutions use a hybrid model.[13] Hybrid models fall between the distribution and the integrative models on the GE program continuum. These models maintain the distribution model but then modify it by adding integrative features. Where a fully integrative model relies solely on high-impact practices as the means for delivering a general education, the hybrid model uses only a few. The most commonly used high-impact practice in hybrid models is the requirement of a common intellectual experience. Such experiences constitute a core curriculum that students follow. That curriculum may include a thematic grouping of required courses, a freshman experience paired with a second year or senior year seminar, or the implementation of learning communities—students grouped together to study a "big question" (e.g. democracy, sustainability, etc.) across disciplines. Other high-impact practices that have been used in the creation of a hybrid GE program include: a service or community-based learning project, a capstone project, and diversity or global learning projects. In a hybrid model, students would still meet standard GE requirements including the successful completion of English 1010, English 2010, a course in American Institutions, and a math course.

Projected Costs

In order to successfully implement and manage a truly integrative GE program, a new position, GE Director, is essential. Although GE revision needs to be faculty driven, changes of this magnitude cannot occur or be managed by an individual or committee trying to juggle GE administration with a full teaching load. This position would head the GE committee, create standards and rubrics for integrative courses, manage GE assessment, provide faculty mentoring and training, instigate professional development opportunities for engaged faculty, etc. Furthermore, funding would also be necessary to send the Snow College GE Committee to the AAC&U's Institute on General Education and Assessment, where faculty would receive training on how to establish and implement new models of GE. Finally, professional development funding and/or release time would need to be available for faculty who take part in the GE re-design, as well as funding to train specific staff members (e.g. academic advisers) on how best to help students transition into a new GE model.

Short- and Long-Term Plans

A GE task force has been assembled to get input about the future of GE at Snow. The Curriculum Committee and the GE Committee (different from the task force) are also in discussions about how to achieve more integration and be more interdisciplinary in our GE program.

A "Faculty of the Future" task force has also been assembled to discuss steering future faculty development and hiring towards teaching in the coming agreed-on GE model.

The long-term plan is to abandon the hubris of prior decades (that once the proper GE model was discovered and implemented it would be immutable) and embrace the idea that change in GE is both inevitable and good. There will always be a discussion about GE and how to best accomplish it.

Recommendations

Research suggests that for general education to be relevant in the 21st Century it must focus not only on knowledge but also on the development of skills that are practical, useful, and in demand. Moreover, research also indicates that the best way to meet essential learning outcomes is through the use of high-impact practices. As Snow College celebrates its 125th anniversary, it is the recommendation of this committee that we take the best of our past and look to our future by implementing a new integrative or hybrid model of general education.

[13] Ibid, 3 .

Appendix A: Snow College General Education Outcomes

A student who graduates from Snow College with an AS or AA degree:

1. Has a fundamental knowledge of human cultures and the natural world, with particular emphasis on:
    - American institutions;
    - the social and behavioral sciences;
    - the physical and life sciences;
    - the humanities;
    - the fine arts;
    - and personal wellness;

2. Can read, retrieve, evaluate, interpret, and deliver information using a variety of traditional and electronic media;

3. Can speak and write effectively and respectfully as a member of the global community, and work effectively as a member of a team;

4. Can reason quantitatively in a variety of contexts;

5. Can respond with informed sensitivity to an artistic work or experience;

6. Can reason analytically, critically, and creatively about nature, culture, facts, values, ethics, and civic policy;

7. Can address complex problems by integrating the knowledge and methodologies of multiple disciplines.

A student who graduates from Snow College with an AA degree:

8. Can speak, read, and write a foreign language with basic proficiency.

Ratified by the Snow College Faculty Senate December 7, 2011

Appendix B: A Guide to High-Impact Practices

First-Year Seminars and Experiences: Many schools now build into the curriculum first-year seminars or other programs that bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis. The highest-quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies. First-year seminars can also involve students with cutting-edge questions in scholarship and with faculty members' own research.

Common Intellectual Experiences: The older idea of a "core" curriculum has evolved into a variety of modern forms, such as a set of required common courses or a vertically organized general education program that includes advanced integrative studies and/or required participation in a learning community (see below). These programs often combine broad themes—e.g., technology and society, global interdependence—with a variety of curricular and co-curricular options for students.

Learning Communities: The key goals for learning communities are to encourage integration of learning across courses and to involve students with "big questions" that matter beyond the classroom. Students take two or more linked courses as a group and work closely with one another and with their professors. Many learning communities explore a common topic and/or common readings through the lenses of different disciplines. Some deliberately link liberal arts and professional courses; others feature service learning.

Writing-Intensive Courses: These courses emphasize writing at all levels of instruction and across the curriculum, including final-year projects. Students are encouraged to produce and revise various forms of writing for different audiences in different disciplines. The effectiveness of this repeated practice "across the curriculum" has led to parallel efforts in such areas as quantitative reasoning, oral communication, information literacy, and, on some campuses, ethical inquiry.

Undergraduate Research: Many colleges and universities are now providing research experiences for students in all disciplines. Undergraduate research, however, has been most prominently used in science disciplines. With strong support from the National Science Foundation and the research community, scientists are reshaping their courses to connect key concepts and questions with students' early and active involvement in systematic investigation and research. The goal is to involve students with actively contested questions, empirical observation, cutting-edge technologies, and the sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions.

Collaborative Assignments and Projects: Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one's own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences. Approaches range from study groups within a course, to team- based assignments and writing, to cooperative projects and research.

Diversity/Global Learning: Many colleges and universities now emphasize courses and programs that help students explore cultures, life experiences, and worldviews different from their own. These studies—which may address US diversity, world cultures, or both—often explore "difficult differences" such as racial, ethnic, and gender inequality, or continuing struggles around the globe for human rights, freedom, and power. Frequently, intercultural studies are augmented by experiential learning in the community and/or by study abroad.

Service Learning, Community-Based Learning: In these programs, field-based "experiential learning" with community partners is an instructional strategy—and often a required part of the course. The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. A key element in these programs is the opportunity students have to both *apply* what they are learning in real-world settings and *reflect* in a classroom setting on their service experiences. These programs model the idea that giving something back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life.

Internships: Internships are another increasingly common form of experiential learning. The idea is to provide students with direct experience in a work setting—usually related to their career interests—and to give them the benefit of supervision and coaching from professionals in the field. If the internship is taken for course credit, students complete a project or paper that is approved by a faculty member.

Capstone Courses and Projects: Whether they're called "senior capstones" or some other name, these culminating experiences require students nearing the end of their college years to create a project of some sort that integrates and applies what they've learned. The project might be a research paper, a performance, a portfolio of "best work," or an exhibit of artwork. Capstones are offered both in departmental programs and, increasingly, in general education as well.

Adapted from: *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, by George D. Kuh (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2.