

General Education in the 21st Century, by the University of California Commission on General Education in the 21st Century (Center for Studies in Higher Education, Berkeley: 2007). xiv + 68.

This report summarizes and recommends GE reforms, with advice on implementations. It is most useful to administrators and faculty who wish to reform GE at their institutions without adding to the roadkill resulting from most such reform attempts. The authors take up current status quo practices from a nationwide sample; those practices are inventoried, deplored, and mined for insights. The authors present readers a formidable case for reform. They then inventory contemporary reform efforts (with some notes on external funding). The writers offer strong recommendations regarding several areas (not all detailed in this review), including giving GE administrators teeth, coping with transfer issues, providing civic education, using distance ed technologies wisely, mastering assessment. Would-be reformers will end their reading informed not only about status quo and reform efforts in GE but armed for debate and with reasons for caution.

The report in hard copy is an uptown production: large format pages (so the page count might mislead one regarding the reading time or chapter lengths), a slim package on heavy stock, ready to be handed around in meetings on campus and capable of returning intact with stickynotes and marginalia. The report is generally well-edited, with very few typos and only occasional brief outbreaks of speaking in tongues, Bureaucratese or Policywonk. There are several compensating short sections which are eloquent, with strong and quotable lines, and some summaries of masterful terseness. Don't wait for the movie. The book is organized in digestible chunks, with an Executive Summary, a Prologue giving national and historical

context, ten chapters (called Sections), a section (not called a section) reviewing recommendations, useful endnotes, and three appendices including tabular summaries of GE requirements at many institutions. The online .pdf gives links from the table of contents to sections and appendices. The package, either online or hard copy, is easy to use.

In this review I emphasize sections broadly applicable to those working on ambitious GE initiatives rather than on modifications. Then I will look at what's missing and at some implications which could add to the report's recommendations and help reformers.

The contextualizing Prologue will help strengthen the resolve of reformers. Higher ed is facing a great many serious challenges, but one of the main ones is the challenge to its own adequacy. That challenge is not about the fairly recent fad of offering majors, but instead is about the loss of a coherent center to the bachelor's degree. Not that providing a center will be easy. The report summarizes several factors leading to this problem, including

- students' and parents' (and legislators') myopic focus on jobs preparation in ignorance of accelerating changes in career demands and the needs for general literacy and thinking skills,
- a consumer model emphasizing choices, and
- the difficulty of achieving consensus on what a core would include if we resist turning that core into a rationale for white patriarchy.

Section 3, "Structure and Culture of the Academic Disciplines," and Section 4, "Integrating General Education into the Fabric of the University" fit together, though it is not obvious at first, as analysis of a problem and a look at some solutions. Section 3 provides an analysis of, among other things, the extent to which organizing Academe around departments contributes to difficulties for strengthening GE. The buzzword is "silos," though surely that word will have buzzed off into oblivion or back into management lit by the time this review sees

print, as soon as someone thinks harder about silage. Departmental structure is foundational, not just within universities. It is built into budgeting, influences catalogs of book publishers and journals, organizes conferences and want ads, provides a home and a primary locus for decisions. GE participation is often a choice made by consenting departments as an added and optional activity, and it is clearly a second choice to maintaining the major when things get rough.

Section 4, on integrating GE into the fabric of universities, begins by commenting on and endorsing the current move on many campuses to appoint the moral equivalent of a vice provost or dean with primary portfolio the administration of GE. They warn such positions need to be undiluted by dishwashing or by taking over other duties from merging positions. The report claims the existence of these positions is one of the most crucial steps toward integrating GE into universities. They note that the practice of fitting the positions into already-existing structures, so as to minimize incursions into others' turfs, has led to reductions in incumbents' power and added ambiguity regarding their functions. The tendency to load other miscellaneous functions onto their plate reduces their ability to address big picture needs for innovation and reform. Further, they often do not have authority to implement changes on their own, and so have to spend much of their time consulting, negotiating, and persuading others whose interests in maintaining turfs make change difficult. Their budgets (with mentioned exceptions of UCLA and, for a while, UC Berkeley) are usually not stable and flexible, but have to be continually renegotiated, and so are subject to reduction, merging, and elimination in lean times. This means their power is reduced and their relationships with others, even if nominally at the same administrative level, may deteriorate from those of peers to relations of beggars to almsgivers. The UCLA budget is crucial to their office being a model of success in making GE a full citizen

of the university, though since the report came out, UCLA has substantially weakened its lower division seminar GE requirement.. Further, the fact that undergraduate education officers do not have the same leverage with faculty as department chairs do is often a severe constraint in recruiting faculty for GE initiatives. Monitoring and evaluation in GE is often less emphasized than departmental offerings in the majors, which means that quality may slip further before it draws attention.

Campuses should, on this account, implement or re-examine and restructure their positions of chiefs of undergraduate education with an eye toward making those positions powerfully able to incorporate GE into the rest of the university. Such chiefs must be given parity with the other deans and vice provosts with stability of budget and with reserves sufficient to provide funding for innovations and faculty incentives, and with authority to make structural changes (in consultation with faculty senate ed policies committees) in their own divisions. Advising for all students should be provided by those who understand the value of and the central role of GE. Implementing just this last recommendation may involve revoking laws of momentum and inertia.

The report's recommendation to put in place a GE czar who can swing serious weight at the central table will be an appealing one. Implementing the change involves navigational hazards. It is not clear that this recommendation will, in fact, fix the problems for which it is designed. Recent history suggests that setting up such a position probably will not make up for a lack of will on the part of the president or the provost, since campuses with such positions still provide support in the case for reform. Any half-hearted implementation will have the effect of opening a new box in the administrative structure into which the blame for failures of GE can be

funneled, with the byproduct of putting a sudden end to the promising administrative careers of the incumbents.

Among the other issues to be addressed in any GE reform, one important set centers around balancing choice with commonality. Can we provide a core to the degree while acquainting students with the possible existence of substantial and legitimate studies outside their majors? These problems are notoriously not solved by allowing students to graze through smorgasbords of individual courses or pairs of courses, even if we require that they pick up at least one salad and one (fill in entries from your own triad or pyramid or tetrahedron here) along the way to the cashier. Such GE programs easily make provincialism worse by misleading students into thinking they understand other disciplines based on token samples involving no research and little writing. The implication that a taste of art history or of philosophy or of biology will round out a student's education further trivializes studies outside the major and adds to the difficulties of making GE a central core of a degree. The smorgasbord approach becomes part of the problem, contributing lack of respect for GE. This report recommends moving more GE requirements into upper-division work within substantial clusters or minors and naming them in the degree. ("Minor" roughly means the equivalent of a half year's full time work either within a discipline or on a set of issues addressed in an approved interdisciplinary package.) Three such minors separate from each student's major would be a formidable remedy for intellectual provincialism. This seems to this reviewer an important and doable recommendation, though its adoption and implementation will certainly test the will of would-be reformers and their presidents.

Now, what remains undone in this report? While bachelor's degrees which provide such combinations of depth and breadth would be a huge step toward remediating provincialism, it would not yet give graduates a common store of knowledge.

There are several ways to address this problem. –Or, of course, we can continue the current standard practice of staying in denial.

The first way is something the report mentions but does not spend much time on, though, e.g., the University of Washington's new course on comparative history of ideas (Appendix C., p. 68) may incorporate a gesture toward it. Some colleges and a few universities, and Honors Colleges within other universities, require something like a Great Books series, sometimes making up most of the degree but usually severely attenuated (see Lindenburger's account of the fate of a list of fifteen works at Stanford, a cautionary tale about academics on all sides being unable to think when their politics are threatened). Notable institutions under this heading are St. John's, Columbia University, and the University of Chicago, especially during the eras of Hutchins, Adler, and van Doren. More than two dozen more institutions and more parts of institutions require such programs. Implementations vary. David Denby's account of his return to Columbia to retake that year-long sequence points out how mistaken it is to take such programs as expressions of any culture's values. This is because the programs include powerful attacks against those values, and not just from Voltaire, Marx, Veblen, Sartre—Plato's *Euthyphro* can be read as an attack on ethics as a search for a theory or code, and Plato provides devastating attacks on Platonism as well. St. John's requires the Eastern classics with their undermining of assumed dichotomies. Sokal's attack on cultural studies is often now another text within the discipline. The stakes involved in Wittgenstein's rethinking of Cartesian dualism are only now being made clear in the social sciences. A less controversial way of formulating this approach

might be as a two-year long course series addressing the intellectual history of the world, with the goal of acquainting students with the best ideas human beings have had.

–So, perhaps there are not several ways, only one. If we really need to disagree, we can argue over how much to water the soup.

The report does mention the problem of “eroded consensus” regarding such things as our shared heritage, which would make putting together a list of central works difficult. As soon as a group decides to include challenges to consensus and to look around the world as part of the study, however, their job becomes easier. The group can also agree that faculty members are allowed a couple of friends under the velvet rope. The standard framework of main divisions into sciences, social sciences, and humanities, even though some universities want to work with finer-grained distinctions, apparently remains secure. That framework can help with design of the course series, and help as well when it is time to resist signing on the dotted line to buy the entire 137-author Adler and van Doren reading list, or some other dotted line for another fad, e.g., of enlightenment through metaphor or cognitive science or systems theory. Such an intellectual history of the world focusing on the best (including the subversive) ideas humans have had would be, when combined with requiring three minors outside one’s major, a second powerful anti-provincialism measure.

Apparently hundreds of millions of dollars of foundation money and millions of hours in faculty time have been poured into the problem of making GE more adequate. Results so far are inconclusive and are not much. No one’s happy yet. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has declared victory and pulled out. The prognosis is not good.

The Center for the Study of Higher Education has documented very well the need for comprehensive and deep reforms of general education. The issues raised here also help re-establish perspective in the field of higher education. Compared with the problem of giving a coherent core to the bachelor's degree, the furor over outcomes assessment and accountability initiatives looks like a footnote to Veblen. Issues about presidential compensation are much less a big deal than are these problems those presidents should have solved.

The search for instances of achieved reforms to help lead the way is less successful. With this study as background, however, the main structures are becoming visible for those who have the will to make general education a coherent core of higher education. Such a general education program will be central to the degree, not susceptible to being pushed off the bench by majors. It will include a series of courses acquainting all students with an intellectual history of the best ideas, including the most formidable challenges, human beings have had. It will include substantive minors outside the major. It will be guided by a leader with administrative clout.

Works Consulted

Adler, Mortimer J. and Charles Van Doren (1972). Appendix A: "A Recommended Reading List." in *How to Read a Book* (Simon and Schuster, NYC). Rev. and updated ed.

Jacques Barzun (1959), *The House of Intellect* (Harper, NYC).

Jacques Barzun (1968), *The American University: How It Runs, Where It Is Going* (Harper and Row, NYC).

Gerald W. Bracey (1995), *Final Exam: A study of the Perpetual Scrutiny of American Education* (TECHNOS Press: Bloomington IN).

David Denby (1996), *Great Books: My Adventures With Homer, Rousseau, Woolf, and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World* (Simon & Schuster, NYC).

Ronald F. Ferguson, *Toward Excellence with Equity: An Emerging Vision for Closing the Achievement Gap* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Educational Press, 2006).

Herbert Lindenberger (1990), *The History in Literature: On Value, Genre, Institutions* (Columbia University Press, Palo Alto).

Thorsten Veblen (1918), *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (B. W. Heusch, NYC).

John W. Powell teaches philosophy at Humboldt State University. He specializes in ancient Greek philosophy, Wittgenstein, and methods. He has previously written on what education is for in the NEA higher education journal, *Thought and Action*. He is currently the General Faculty President at HSU, and so is working on a list of coping skills for faculty in meetings.

Abstract: A report from the Center for the Study of Higher Education is reviewed and appraised as valuable for those considering reforms of general education. Implications and recommendations are also articulated with an eye to increasing the current abysmal odds for success.