

# **The Importance and Challenges of General Education: A Review of Literature**

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## **Introduction**

Today, approximately 95 percent of four-year colleges and universities in the United States offer general education programs—“broad courses that students usually take in the initial phase of college, before focusing on a major” (Aloi, Gardner, & Lusher, 2003; Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007, p. 13). These courses take up almost 30 percent of the undergraduate curriculum and have become an “important feature of the student academic experience in American colleges and universities” (Brint, Proctor, Murphy, Turk-Bicakci, & Hanneman, 2009, p. 605). Most general education programs today are designed to generate valuable student outcomes and play a significant role in the undergraduate curriculum.

General education programs, however, encounter several challenges that prevent desired student learning. At the same time, assessments of these courses have raised their importance and recognition. Currently, almost 90 percent of higher education institutions are in the process of assessing or modifying their general education programs (Hart Research Associates, 2009). Because general education programs play a significant role in students’ education in American colleges and universities today, I contend that the importance and challenges of general education programs should be reexamined.

## **History and Evolution of General Education**

General education requirements are rooted in the liberal arts tradition, whose history are traced to “Roman and Greek orators and philosophers over two thousand years ago” (Bourke, Bray, & Horton, 2009, p. 221). These classic European models focused on preparing students for professional careers mostly in law and medicine, and focused mainly on “classic literary works, philosophy, foreign languages, rhetoric, and logic” (Hachtmann, 2012, p. 16). According to Hachtmann (2012), these models emphasized on transmitting “knowledge of disciplinary facts and concepts” to students (p. 19).

The roles and goals of general education, however, evolved throughout the history of American higher education. A study conducted through the 1975-2000 period shows that general education curricula expanded and diversified incrementally to include more subject areas (Brint et al., 2009). In fact, general education programs in the US now offer courses in various fields, including performing arts, humanities, science, and mathematics. According to Brint et al. (2009), these changes were implemented to satisfy the needs of influential business and governmental actors that sought higher career outcomes from graduates. Driven by these demands, general education programs have evolved into the current model, which provides diverse and practical courses that prepare students to be “responsible citizens and professionals upon graduation” (Hatchmann, 2012, p. 19). Similarly, most general education programs today are designed to acquaint students with the skills that employers and other education stakeholders value, such as teamwork, communication, problem solving, and social responsibility (Association of American Colleges and

Universities, 2007; Miller & Sundre, 2008). In contrast to the classic European models, the current general education programs in the US offer a wide variety of courses that are designed to create valuable outcomes for both the students and future employers.

### **Challenges of General Education Assessments**

Despite the importance and valuable outcomes of general education, however, these programs fall short of their desired outcomes. In order to bring about institutional strategies that improve student learning, it is essential to assess whether students are learning what they are supposed to learn in these courses (Aloi et al., 2003). In fact, most American universities and colleges are currently in the process of general education assessments (Hart Research Associates, 2009). Studies show that general education programs encounter three main challenges that prevent desired outcomes.

First, many students do not value these courses. A study by Miller and Sundre (2008) shows that while entering students show equal motivation toward all of their courses, by the second year of college, students become “much less motivated to learn and perform in their general education courses” as compared to other courses (p. 165). In another study, conducted by Harmes and Miller, students reported that general education courses “often did not promote higher- level engagement and did not provide sufficient depth of coverage of the subject matter” (Miller & Sundre, 2008, p. 152). As Glynn, Aultman, and Owens (2005) maintain that motivation plays a fundamental role in promoting successful learning in general education programs, it is difficult to produce desired student outcomes when students show low motivation towards these courses.

Second, the broad nature of general education programs makes it more difficult to establish clear goals. Yin and Volkweint (2010) holds that specifying “clear purposes, learning goals, and assessment audiences” is essential for creating good foundations for any assessment program (p. 84). According to Aloi et al. (2003), however, assessment of general education is “difficult to design and implement because general education curriculum is the responsibility of all faculty, yet no one individual or group is held accountable for program results” (p. 242). Because instructors that teach general education courses are from various academic departments, consensus on the desired outcomes and goals is seldom reached.

Lastly, Yin and Volkwein (2010) add that “the selection of appropriate methods and instruments” is another difficulty that general education assessments encounter (p. 86). Wehlburg (2010) agrees that the overall goals of general education—critical thinking, problem solving, and communication—are difficult to measure. As Marinara, Vajravelu, and Young (2004) note, general education programs are not usually “constructed as a ‘program’ in the same sense that majors are” (p. 1), which makes it difficult for higher education institutions to create effective measurement to assess general education programs.

### **Future of General Education**

As these studies show, assessing general education is a difficult process. In order to grapple with these challenges, scholars have suggested ways to improve student learning in these courses. Several authors emphasize the following five steps in assessment: 1) specify the purposes, goals, and audiences, 2) design methods and measures, 3) carry out the data collection and analysis, 4)

communicate the findings to the audience, and 5) obtain feedback, follow-up, redesign, and improvement (Yin & Volkwein, 2010). Numerous scholars support that articulating a clear goal is a crucial first step for developing successful assessments. For example, Wehlburg (2010) argues that effective assessment plans cannot be created without “an integrated concept of which general education’s goals students should reach” (p. 90). Furman (2013) agrees that it is essential to reexamine general education in meaningful ways that can be articulated and measured for building a strong assessment of general education. As these studies show, there is a broad consensus on the importance of establishing clear goals, and that it must be the top priority in general education assessments.

How to measure student learning is another key factor in general education assessments. Aloï et al. (2003) suggest using a variety of assessment techniques—including both direct and indirect assessments—to ensure validity in the data collected. While direct assessments usually take the form of exams to gain “evidence about student learning and the learning environment,” indirect assessments measure “how students feel about learning and their learning environment” through surveys and interviews (Eder, 2004, p. 137). Wehlburg (2010) agrees that data-based assessments that focus on “how to enhance student learning,” would be effective and meaningful to improve student outcomes in general education (p. 91). In addition to articulating the goals of general education, it is crucial to reexamine the methods to measure student outcomes.

### Conclusion

As general education programs take up a large portion of the undergraduate curriculum in the US, the courses have significant implications on students’ learning and future careers. General education programs do not only teach the specific contents but also acquaint students with valuable knowledge and skills that are vital throughout the collegiate experience and for future careers. General education programs encounter several challenges—low student motivation, unclear goals, difficult measurements. Many scholars emphasize the importance of articulating clear goals and using various assessment techniques to ensure validity in the collection of data.

It is interesting that even though studies indicate that students show different attitudes towards general education and non-general education courses, little research focused on the different pedagogical approaches that work effectively in those courses. Also, little research showed how student outcomes and motivation could be promoted in general education courses. Future research can and should focus on the effective pedagogical approaches that ensure desired learning outcomes in general education programs.

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