

Meaningful General Education Reform: Integrating Core Curricula and Institutional Values

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Abstract—A central element of higher education today is the “core” or “general education” curriculum: that configuration of courses that often encompasses the essence of liberal arts education. Ensuring that such offerings reflect the mission and values of the institution is a challenge faced by most college and universities, often more than once. This paper presents an action model of program planning designed to structure the processes of developing, implementing and revising core curricula in a manner consistent with key institutional goals and objectives. Through presentation of a case study from a university in the United States, the elements of needs assessment, stakeholder investment and collaborative compromise are shown as key components of a planning strategy that can produce a general education program that is comprehensive, academically rigorous, assessable, and mission consistent. The paper concludes with recommendations for both the implementation and evaluation of such programs in practice.

Keywords—Academic assessment, academic program planning, curriculum development, general education reform.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE last two decades have been a time of significant change for American institutions of higher education. The once dominant paradigm of schools selecting the best students has evolved into a more consumer focused educational marketplace in which all but the most selective colleges and universities now compete for students at all levels. The impact of this evolution, while broad-based, has been most clearly evident in the realm of “planned change,” intentional efforts designed to clarify or redefine an institution’s core mission or identity. A key place where such efforts often begin is in the array of academic offerings known as the “core” or the “general education” curriculum.

Mandated by more than 85 percent of colleges and universities in the US [1], the general education core can comprise as much as one-third of baccalaureate credit requirements and is often the locus of a college or university’s identity. Reflecting valued instructional and educational priorities, this identity is routinely framed as the institutional mission. Whether religiously based or centered on a more secular philosophy, a college or university’s mission statement serves to distinguish the institution from others of its kind and, ideally, establishes a unique identity and niche within which the school may prosper.

A source of challenge and frustration for advocates of planned change in higher education is the extent to which these two elements of institutional culture are often

oppositional. The mission statement, seemingly understood by all, is often perceived as a work of abstract art for those tasked with matching institutional goals and curricular objectives. Rather than an objective enterprise, general education reform often becomes a battlefield for the protection of intellectual terrain and the sustained dominance of one discipline or faculty group over another. The result, too often, is core curriculum reform that frustrates the goal of planning by providing very little meaningful advance in needed areas.

This paper addresses just such a scenario through the presentation of a case study from an American university in which the dynamics described above had brought effective programmatic change to a standstill. The combination of murky goal setting, entrenched positions of curricular control and diffused leadership created a scenario in which the accomplishment of real core reform was made nearly impossible. This situation was reversed, however, through the application of a comprehensive model of planned change, the key components of which drawing resources from the institution itself to make a “home-grown solution” both palatable and effective. The presentation of this model begins with a discussion of the relevant literature on the dynamics of core curricula and the keys to effective institutional change.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2002, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) published the results of a two-year study of the elements and dynamics seen as essential to a meaningful post-secondary education. Entitled *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, the report identified the need for college to serve as a “transformational educational experience,” citing the general or core curriculum as the most useful instructional tool for achieving this aim. The report highlighted cross-national differences in college graduation rates, with the United Kingdom and other European societies having significantly higher rates than the US. A primary reason for America’s lag, the authors argued, stems from the lack of both preparedness and effective instruction in mathematics and writing skills, particularly for disadvantaged students [2]. To address this challenge, the authors looked to the framework of general or liberal learning, what many call the “core curriculum.”

Progress is thus described as an “empowering liberal education” that blends core competencies of learning with practical, work-related elements of the academic major. This approach to “intentional learning” involves a curriculum that encompasses quantitative and critical reasoning skills, communication techniques, frameworks of creative

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expression, civic engagement and a global/cross cultural awareness. Combined with comprehensive instruction in the chosen field of study, AAC&U views this model of instruction as the ideal to which colleges and universities should aspire to educate learners who are informed, empowered and socially responsible.

While laudable, institutions learned quickly that recognizing and achieving this goal were two distinct endeavors. As general education reform efforts collided with elements of the institutional climate and the availability of needed resources, academic leaders realized that an equally new and innovative approach to planned change would be needed for this set of reforms to be realized in meaningful ways. Thus, academic change agents soon realized that an essential key to launching such efforts, according to Hachtman, is strong administrative support for the planned change, as well as decisive leadership at all decision-making levels [3]. Equally significant is a clear sense of “contextual knowledge,” that is, an awareness of those factors that affect change in the setting and how key stakeholders respond to such change [4].

Once identified, such tools become a foundation of credibility for academic leaders, which, in turn, can facilitate a pathway to meaningful general education reform. The key, however, is the quality of leadership guiding general education reform, as this has been identified as a primary place of analytic scrutiny to ensure a successful effort. Gano-Phillips and Barnett have observed that self-reflection on existing strengths and weaknesses in leadership are a critical starting place for reform [5]. Such reflection, if realistic and thorough, can identify elements of transformative strength within the institutional culture that can be used as tools for change throughout the process. Similarly, such assessment can highlight impediments to progress that are to be avoided or managed along the way. Key examples of both will be highlighted in the case study at hand.

Once the process begins, however, a new array of leadership strengths and strategies is necessary to ensure success. These assets are best described in terms of three distinct qualities of leadership, each contributing key components to an overall model of effective general education reform. The first of these, “collaboration,” confirms that effective change will unlikely be achieved by a single individual or institutional entity. Rather, the strategy must be inclusive of all relevant stakeholders in the educational setting-administrators, faculty, staff, and, of course, students. Secondly, collaboration succeeds in an environment of “trust” where participating stakeholders accept the legitimacy of the overall effort and the openness of dialog and decision-making. If the institutional landscape is one of disciplinary silos and intimidation, then trust building becomes more challenging and essential. Finally, planned curricular change flourishes when those involved see themselves as “stewards” of the institution, leading the effort on behalf of the community as a whole, rather than a segmented, powerful constituency [6].

A collaborative, trustworthy and consequential engine must be complemented by a vehicle of similar stature and academic credibility. Thus, the nature of the proposed general education

reform must bring something meaningful and substantial to the institution, as a simple repackaging of the current product will be recognized quickly as a fraud and dismissed by participants. While used repeatedly in a variety of professional contexts, the term “best practices” suggests a valuable asset to this process, namely, the need for a reform initiative to possess a clear and measureable value-added quality that is recognized and embraced by academic community. A significant body of general education research over the last two decades has helped define the quality in question.

III. GENERAL EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

A central element of general education reform in this century has been a consistent call for a dynamic and comprehensive focus of core curricula. Rather than a disjointed laundry-list of requirements to be checked-off as completed, the post-modern curriculum is to be interactive, academically rigorous, socially and morally responsible and, most importantly, reflective of and linked to the institutional mission [7]. While this latter factor will vary, an academic consensus has emerged on the elements of strategy necessary to accomplish the former objectives.

The first of these elements is an emphasis on the demonstration of “broad competencies,” rather than a focus on the mastery of content alone [8]. In place of traditional exams with fixed question and answer categories, the current trend embraces evaluation of student learning that draws from multiple forms of assessment. Written analytic pieces, oral and multi-media presentations, visual and performance art and applied practice models are all examples of techniques developed to capture the breadth of general education learning through a broader array of assessment strategies. The benefits of this approach extend to the student, whose learning ability is more likely to be engaged, and to the institution, through a more valid and reliable array of outcome indicators.

A second element involves the use of “integrative learning experiences” across the curriculum. Learning about the world beyond the classroom has been deemed an essential component of creating that spark of relevance necessary for dynamic learning. More than just the traditional class trip, such efforts in higher education have evolved into thematic social and behavioral experiences linked to the goals of specific courses or broad curricula. Often consistent with institutional heritage or priorities, initiatives with labels such “service learning” or “civic engagement” have become a widely used and well received tool for educators. Studies of the value-added quality of such efforts have shown significant increases in levels of both student engagement in the subject matter and awareness of the broader social implications of what is learned in the classroom [9].

A final element emphasizes the recent priority given to assessment of student learning and the ways in which such evaluations can be an embedded part of the curriculum itself. This process begins with a specification of programmatic and course-based learning objectives, which, once in place, become measurable indicators of the overarching goals to be achieved. Assessing these indicators can occur through means

directed at the level of the individual course (formative) or at level of the program itself (summative). The framework of realizing both often takes the form of a “curriculum map” that identifies the points in the program where each learning objective is introduced, reinforced and assessed. The “data” involved are specific assignments, randomly selected and graded through standardized rubrics, that serve as “artifacts,” or indicators of measurable performance at key points along the curriculum. Just as tiles form a mosaic, so, too, these data points join to form a portrait of student learning in relation to a defined outcome. Taken together, these portraits form a gallery that serves to inform both institutional planners and external governing bodies.

The heart of such efforts is most often the “mission” of the institution itself. Described as the “reason for being” of an organization, the mission statement defines purpose and identifies those unique qualities and aspects that distinguish the institution from its competitors [10]. For colleges and universities, the mission often identifies a particular value perspective (religious or otherwise) that shapes the academic focus of the institution, as well as its co- and extra-curricular programming and initiatives. Given that the general education curriculum is often the intersection of mission and instruction, linking the two becomes a primary goal of institutional planning. When such efforts evolve and are shaped by the elements of organizational context discussed above, the challenge of achieving a meaningful outcome becomes all the more significant.

It is just to this challenge that the following case study is devoted. Organizational history, faculty dynamics and institutional politics had all combined to frustrate efforts to link general education instruction with mission values. This trend was reversed, however, through the application of a strategy of planned change involving collaborative stewardship that employed principles of open-decision-making, inclusive dialog and shared curricular ownership to create an environment for meaningful and ongoing general education reform.

IV. GENERAL EDUCATION REFORM AT HOLY FAMILY UNIVERSITY

Located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Holy Family University is a mid-sized educational institution offering undergraduate and graduate academic and professional degrees in more than thirty different disciplines. Founded in 1954 by the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth (CSFN), Holy Family College was chartered as a college for women, one of few such institutions in the area at the time. Guided by the institutional motto, “teneorvotis” (I am bound by my responsibility), the college quickly grew as a credible, faith-based place of instruction for women seeking higher education in the sciences and professional preparation as teachers and nurses. As times demanded, the college became co-educational in 1970 and achieved university status in 2002. Today, Holy Family University is comprised of four schools on three campuses and enrolls over 3,000 students pursuing degrees at all academic levels.

Regardless of academic focus, all undergraduate students at the university are required to complete the same liberal arts core curriculum, developed and overseen by faculty of the School of Arts and Sciences. This last fact is significant, both in terms of the impact of Arts and Sciences’ dominance over the core and the unwillingness of the school’s faculty to allow input from other academic sectors of the university.

Prior to this most recent reform effort, Holy Family University’s general education curriculum had been in place since 2009 and was best described as a “distributive core,” meaning that the required 45 credits could be selected from a long list of possible choices across numerous liberal arts disciplines. The framework for organizing these courses was itself, imprecise, as it attempted to map seven content areas onto an amorphous array of institutional outcomes (see Table I).

TABLE I
2009 CORE CURRICULUM STRUCTURE-45 TOTAL CREDITS

Content Areas	Course/Credit Requirements
Knowledge of God	2 courses/6 credits
Knowledge of Human Quest	2 courses/6 credits
Knowledge of Global Perspective	3 courses/9 credits
Knowledge of Mathematics	1 course/3 credits
Knowledge of Natural Science	2 courses/6 credits
Knowledge of National Experience	2 courses/6 credits
Writing, Speech, Reading	3 courses/9 credits

This last point illustrates a significant challenge facing the university, in that the institutional mission—a key element of the university’s identity—had not been centrally linked to the curriculum product. This “lack of fit” provided no coherent impetus for an organizing focus and resulted in an educational package with no discernible identity or platform of administrative advocacy. Consequently, efforts to assess and reform the curriculum in 2010 and 2011 met with little success after protracted and often contentious program reviews. The result was a curriculum with no meaningful purpose or connection to the university identity, nor any useful frameworks for evaluating the quality and extent of student learning.

In 2013, a new institutional leadership team endeavored to, once again, address this challenge. This time, however, the effort was guided by strategy, tools and resources informed by best practices, all of which contributed to the application of an approach defined as the “directed/collaborative model of curricular change.” Drawing from the insights discussed above, this model involved the implementation of three key components of planned change: decisive administrative direction, content definition and stakeholder investment. Each of these elements is described below in terms of its utility for effecting the desired curricular change.

V. PART I: DECISIVE ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTION

The practical starting point for this effort involved the establishment of the specific decision-making body that would define and manage the revision process. To avoid the mistakes of the past, senior leadership authorized the creation of an ad

hoc committee tasked with the review and reform of the general education core. What made this unique, however, was the defined scope and longevity of the group itself. While led by the Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences (the traditional home of the curriculum), the General Education Committee was framed to include representatives from each sector of the university, i.e., the Schools of Business Administration, Education and Nursing, as well as student life and support services. This deliberate effort thus brought a myriad of voices to the table, each able to articulate unique perspectives and interests and to contribute to the redesign of the curriculum.

This element also facilitated a more broad-based objective, that of “opening the core” to include courses from across the schools among those receiving general education credit. A long-standing complaint of those outside Arts and Sciences, the active pursuit of this objective created an environment of open, cooperative dialog that that was essential to achieving meaningful change.

An additional asset was the decision by senior administration to ensure a long-term voice for the committee by approving its status as a “standing committee” to be included in the official policy documents of the university. The value added of this decision was manifest in the collegiality exhibited by the group, as well as in their sense of the long-term impact of the changes they were recommending, as part of their charge was to define the structures and processes by which members were chosen and remained on the committee. In sum, these efforts created a decision-making body that was reflective of the broad constituencies of the university and was staffed by invested advocates of change and inclusion. The resulting dynamic allowed for a comprehensive review of the existing curriculum structure, as well as an open consideration of best practices and their degree of “fit” with what was possible institutionally.

VI. PART II: CONTENT DEFINITION

To maximize the value of the dynamic described above, the committee began by crafting a clear specification of curricular the elements to be reformed and the goals driving the agenda. In the case of Holy Family’s general education program, the goals were two: first, to establish a framework for linking the institutional mission with the broad categorical pillars of the curriculum; second, to align specific courses/content with each pillar. Achieving the first involved focus on the Greek intellectual tradition of “paideia,” educating the whole person, an emphasis routinely endorsed in the general education literature. The result was the identification of six “curricular pillars” reflective of the key dimensions of the university’s mission. These were then aligned with the existing array of general education courses. The resulting structure is presented in Table II.

TABLE II
2013 REVISED CORE CURRICULUM STRUCTURE-45 TOTAL CREDITS

Curricular Pillars	Course Choice Content Areas
Theological Literacy (6 credits)	Religion, Theology
Global Perspective (12 credits)	History, World Languages
Social Consciousness (6 credits)	Arts, Philosophy, English, Sociology, Psychology
Communication (9 credits)	Writing/Public Speaking Sequence
Scientific/Technological Competence (9 credits)	Mathematics, General Science (lab and non-lab)
Critical Thinking (3 credits)	General Education Capstone

The revised curriculum contained some old and new features. Most significant among the old was the fact that the core credit total remained at 45. This was a deliberate effort designed to assist the adoption of the new model with a minimum of disruption to the curricula of the various degree granting programs, many of which are crafted to remain within the 120 credit total required for graduation. In addition, all courses included in the previous model were retained in the first iteration of the new curriculum, also a deliberate effort to assuage concerns (and possible opposition) by those senior faculty protecting courses they deemed essential.

Most prominent among the new features was the addition of a “critical thinking” pillar realized through the introduction of a senior-level capstone course. Intended for and required of all students preparing for graduation, the capstone course was proposed as a seminar focusing on key themes, social/global phenomena and/or philosophical/ ethical issues. The decision on what issues are to be featured in all sections of the course would be made on an annual basis by the General Education Committee, following a solicitation of input from university faculty. Standard learning outcomes would be linked to specified readings, assignments and activities, which would include dedicated exercises involving elements of civic engagement and service learning outside the classroom. The nature of the course and its placement in the final semesters of instruction were seen to create a point of summative assessment for the curriculum, as completion of all previous general education requirements would be a prerequisite for enrollment. This latter feature was seen as a significant strength of the proposed reform, as previous models had either lacked such a pinnacle learning experience or included capstone courses that were disconnected from the learning goals present in the remainder of the curriculum.

VII. PART III: STAKEHOLDER INVESTMENT

Once complete, this revised general education model needed approval from all levels of the university community, beginning, quite naturally, with the faculty. What made this effort unique from less successful attempts in the past was the fact that most of the members of the General Education Committee were key “stakeholders” from across the university. This term was loosely applied to faculty possessing one or more of the following qualities: senior faculty rank (i.e., “Professor”), more than 10 years employment at the university, membership on other, key university committees

(e.g., curriculum, assessment, etc.) and respected/trusted by colleagues. Although seeming manipulative, this latter quality was a key tool in gaining broad-based support for the proposal changes.

Also of value was a comprehensive commitment to “transparency,” in terms of the openness of committee discussions and the presentation of “progress reports” on the status of curriculum development to the various schools by members of the team. This facilitated an invaluable feedback loop for the committee and helped shape the curriculum to clearly reflect the input of all constituents. The fact that specific requests or preferences made by key faculty would be reflected in subsequent drafts of the curriculum proposal established a basic trust in the process and a platform of support for change that proved useful for the curriculum’s ultimate approval.

The process of this approval began in each academic unit, as the committee’s final product was presented to each group of faculty by the Vice-President for Academic Affairs and the Dean of Arts and Science (also the committee chair). While each conversation revealed unanticipated problems and suggestions, they also provided opportunities for on the spot changes (where possible) and a sense of “ownership” of the process that further enhanced popular support for the proposal. This reflexivity ultimately combined with the new openness of the core and the permanency of the general education effort to garner widespread, near unanimous support for the proposed changes from all sectors of the university. Final approval came from the institution’s governing board in May, 2014 and the new model was put into effect for all students entering the university in the following fall.

VIII. CONCLUSION: ASSESSING THE IMPACT

While still early in its implementation, Holy Family’s revised general education curriculum has been met with significant success. The General Education Committee has begun the approval process for the inclusion of “non-liberal arts” courses in the core for the first time in the university’s history. In addition, the senior level seminar has been fully articulated in terms of course specifics and desired learning outcomes and will be offered for the first time in the fall, 2015 semester. Assessment data from this course, as it is collected, will build a foundation of evaluation data that will be used by the committee to review the impact of the overall curriculum on student learning.

What remains uncertain is the extent to which uniformity of focus and instruction will be achieved by those teaching the various courses in the curriculum, including the senior seminar. An issue faced by most colleges and universities, such a lack of instructional uniformity, once identified, must be addressed at an institutional level in the form of effective professional development of faculty. It is anticipated that such efforts will be overseen by the General Education Committee, informed by best practices and support by university resources.

While still a work in progress, this process of core curriculum reform illustrates the potential value of

implementing a directed/collaborative model of curricular change. What had been a dysfunctional and ineffectual effort in the past became a point of common identification and progress through application of the model’s elements. Future research should explore the potential generalizability of this model to a broader cross-section of educational institutions, refining and tailoring what worked at Holy Family University to fit institutions of different sizes and mission orientations. Such efforts may represent important steps in the development of a new paradigm of planned change in general education, one that employs accessible and influential talents and resources to meaningfully enhance the liberal education of 21st century students.

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