Reflections on Liberal/General Education
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I am happy to accept Provost Griffith's invitation to reflect with you today on the important work you are doing at York College to reform your General Education program. Reform, the word that Linda Grasso stressed in her remarks, is to be distinguished from revolution. Reform, we assume, can happen only through faculty and administrators working together to effect real change. As Linda says, this is an amazing opportunity for faculty to come together, embrace the love of inquiry, and create "something larger than ourselves."

It is clear that the innovative and exciting recommendations of your General Education Task Force have generated a number of vital questions about what to do next. It feels as if you are on the brink of making significant college-wide changes to move General Education into the new century. It is also clear that you have the vital ingredients on your side—the support and interest of your senior leadership and the promise of resources; the commitment of a faculty working together on the Task Force to envision a new Gen Ed; and, here, today, the leaders of the key academic and administrative components of the college, willing to think through how to move forward. It is important, as the provost says, for all of you to collaborate on the next steps.

Dr. Judith Summerfield

As University Dean for Undergraduate Education for half a dozen years, I have had the chance to watch as each of the colleges across the University struggled with the same questions. In the General Education Project that we created at CUNY, representatives from all seventeen colleges sat around the same table—two of your Task Force co-chairs, Debra Swoboda and Vadim Moldovan, included—to debate the issues, learn from each other, and from what is going on in the nation. We tried to stake out common ground, and tackle the tough questions:
- What do we want our graduates to have gained from their college experience?
- What kind of liberal or general education for the 21st century?
- What do we mean by a liberal or general education? What's the difference?
- What about articulation among the CUNY colleges? What do transfer students need?
- What about assessment? Middle States expects us to attend to General Education, as well as to the majors. So do national organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), who see a liberal education as key to educating college students to participate in the democracy and in the global world.

But at this, the largest urban public university in the country, where resources are limited, can we create a culture where our entire faculty, both full-timers and part-timers, are engaged in the important mission of teaching General Education?

What I want to offer today is a framework for you to consider as you move forward in this critical work, and in keeping with the spirit of the day, I offer these words of wisdom to consider as a challenge to keep in mind:

"A college's General Education curriculum, what the faculty chooses to require of everyone, is a reflection of its overall educational philosophy, even when the faculty chooses to require nothing" (p.3).

This is Louis Menand, in "The Problem of General Education" in his Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University (Norton, 2009). Menand was formerly a colleague in the English Department at Queens College, then at the Graduate Center, and now at Harvard. He writes frequently for

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Education and a liberal arts education? There is an important history here, and a tension between two often opposing world views: the term General Education is frequently seen as practical, technical, and even experiential. The focus is on what students can do, their performance, competencies, and skills—on writing, reading, speaking effectively, critical and creative thinking, computing, etc.

On the other hand, the terms, a liberal education or the liberal arts and sciences, the liberal arts (for short) is a focus on gaining and constructing knowledge. The term derives from the classical tradition, of educating “free” men and women to participate in a democracy.

The liberal arts and sciences are meant to give students the opportunity for broad exposure to the arts, humanities, literature, the social and natural sciences. The focus is on knowing, on gaining and constructing knowledge. Somewhere along the way, probably twenty years ago, when the word, liberal, became politically problematic, the term, General Education, became the preferable usage.

Delve into the rich history of liberal/general education, and you enter an ongoing debate about what college is for—and who is entitled to a college education.

Is a liberal education only to be had by students at the ivy’s and in the small liberal arts colleges? And the rest of our students are to have a vocational degree? This is a critical debate for us, as faculty, to have. Menand lays out the possibilities of our seeing a dialectic between a liberal arts and a practical education:

"Almost any liberal arts field can be made non-liberal by turning it in the direction of some practical skill with which it is already associated. English departments can become writing programs, even publishing programs... But conversely, and more importantly, any practical field can be made liberal simply by teaching it historically or theoretically... Accounting is a trade, but the history of accounting is a subject of disinterested inquiry—a liberal art" (p. 55).

In the end, the debate about the new curriculum needs to confront the central tensions between what we mean by knowledge and skills, knowing and doing, the theoretical and the practical, and, ultimately, between the liberal arts and a practical or professional degree.

Second, the faculty needs to make their educational philosophy explicit, particularly those often unarticulated beliefs about what they think students are capable of learning. What do we expect of our students? What—and how—do we think they can—or cannot—learn? The curriculum and pedagogies that you construct—what this faculty chooses to require of everyone—is a reflection of your overall educational beliefs, and that philosophy needs to be made explicit, historicized, and debated.

Queens College, since its founding in 1937, has constructed four General Education curricula. The four phrases of our curricula represent the different times we were living in. The first lasted 33 years, from 1937 to 1970, and modeled the Columbia core, with two year-long courses in Contemporary Civilization (CC), and oral exams in the senior...
year. It is still viewed fondly by many alumni as a curriculum that reflected the conviction that Queens College students were as "good" as those at Columbia.

The second curriculum lasted five years, from 1970-1976. It was born in the heat of the 60's cultural revolution and eliminated all requirements except Freshman Composition. Students were perfectly capable of choosing what they wanted to learn, so it was thought. And, above all, the curriculum should be relevant to the times.

The third curriculum, a reaction against the second, lasted from 1976 until 2009, another thirty-three years. This curriculum was a distributional model - a compromise between a core and no-requirements. It was predicated on the belief that students were capable of making good choices, but needed a set of liberal arts categories to choose from. As the years went by, the curriculum, owned by no one, generated over 400 choices and satisfied few. General Education was seen by most students as those required courses that needed to be gone through quickly, in order to get to the major.

In those years, as well, students' majors shifted more and more away from the liberal arts to the professional degrees, particularly accounting, and more recently, the new Bachelors of Business Administration.

At Queens, we have been deciding on the new 21st century curriculum for the past seven or eight years. Our General Education Task Force Report was issued in 2004; intense Senate deliberations followed during the next four years; and the curriculum, although not yet formed into a coherent whole, was launched Fall 2009, and is still very much a work in progress. But we have a chance at Queens to create a curriculum that we see as the "college major," and are building the necessary structures to engage and support full and part-time faculty in teaching undergraduates in their crucial first and second years.

Our framework, then, includes a profound recognition that this is faculty work of the highest order, that the whole college must come together around the debates and decisions. The curriculum needs to be designed for our students, including those students who transfer in. The final design must be embraced by the whole college.

Third, there needs to be a plan for implementation. There is often a long distance between the idea and its fruition. In the process, several marriages need to be arranged, some of them a bit tricky: between faculty authors (Task Force) and faculty governance (Senate). Too often there is a loss in translation from idea to final form. The two, the Task Force committee and the Senate curriculum committees must work together to create an implementable curriculum. This is work that none of us has done before: we need to strategize together about how best to proceed, even before the package is put before the Faculty Senate for a vote.

There is also a necessary marriage between faculty and administrators, who must provide support and resources for the final implementation. More and more, colleges across the country are creating General Education offices, coordinated by a senior administrator, a dean or associate provost, who sees to the development of the General Education program. At Queens, we created the new Office of General Education, with an academic dean at the helm. We created a Senate committee expressly devoted to developing the new General Education courses, and we created a college-wide General Education Council to work out details for the whole program. The conversation is ongoing: how will this curriculum play out on the ground? What kinds of structures need to be put into place? Which departments will do the heavy lifting? Where are student voices? Who will read and vet proposals? What about assessment?

How does the program look on the
ground? The notion of a program is critical. Too often we think in terms of course requirements, but courses belong to departments, and general education courses often get short shrift in departmental thinking and planning. The goal is the creation of a coherent program, where the parts connect to the whole, and where students can expect to be encouraged to make connections between courses, disciplines, between this idea and that, and where the faculty teaching General Education are in conversation with each other about the kinds of pedagogy that are most effective in the first- and second-year college classroom.

At Queens, we have reformed our Freshman Year Initiative: these are the first-year learning communities that pair two courses, a newly envisioned freshman-writing course with an introductory Perspectives course. (Our new General Education is called Perspectives on the Liberal Arts and Sciences.) Built into the evolving program is a research project: this past Fall 2010, we surveyed nearly 800 first-year students at the beginning and end of their first semester in college to get a sense of what they expect and what they find during their first semester of college. We are following up in the second semester with a pilot freshman seminar.

We designed a president's grant for faculty to develop innovative pedagogies in introductory general education courses, and also in the new culminating experience, a capstone or synthesis course. A number of groundbreaking ideas are coming forth: divisional general education courses in the sciences called "issues in Science," and also in education, a course on "Global Education," were offered this Fall.

Finally, if this is to be a "college major," it needs to be understood and embraced by the entire college. The president, provost, faculty, advisors - everyone should be able to answer this question to any student, prospective student, or parent? What is General Education at Queens? At York? And why?

If you talk with the many alumni who hail from the first curriculum at Queens, they typically extol the Core, particularly Contemporary Civilization (CC), and even the oral exams at the end, and the final thesis. What do we want our alumni twenty years from now to remember about what the new curriculum offers? What kind of signature do we hope they will carry with them?

One last word: I did say that the work is more critical today than it was yesterday. CUNY is on the brink of doing what other systems across the country are doing, creating a university-wide framework for General Education, presumably for ease of transfer, with a common set of General Education categories, numbering systems, learning goals, and assessment. The promise is that the local curriculum can still remain, but that it must align with agreed-upon CUNY curricula parameters. (I imagine it as a programmatic equivalency to the TIPPS system. See the University of Georgia system.) Whatever it will be, it needs to be easy to assess. And therein lie the dangers. We all know that the culture is moving more and more towards creating systems of education that can be easily assessed - from primary schools through high school and into college. I worry, though, that to standardize means to reduce, to make the curriculum more limited, more "basic," so that it can easily be measured. I worry that the ideals of a broad, rich liberal education can be dispensed with, scaled back, focused on "merely" preparing students with necessary skills for the work force. We need to do more: college should provide students with opportunities to explore and taste knowledge in various ways and from various perspectives, at the same time that they do learn to develop fully their critical abilities to write, read, use language and other symbol systems, effectively, productively, creatively.

They need a "liberal general education," that is my point. They need a curriculum that speaks to the complex times we are living in and to the past, one that students experience as meaningful and useful, and one that enables them to envision and contribute to the future. "There is a world to be known," says William James. A liberal general education opens doors to that world for all students.*

*We are not autonomous; we all live within this federated CUNY, and in the world, and this attempt at standardizing the curricular structures may be a good move, but my sense is that whatever it will be, it will all be done quickly. We all need to have out houses in order to do it well. I applaud your efforts at York to do this hard, but critical work - and urge you to continue, in good time.