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General Education: Why Do We Need It, and Where Did It Come From?

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General Education: Why Do We Need It, and Where Did It Come From?

Abstract

General education is one of those things that everyone knows how to fix but no one is able to do anything about. Woodrow Wilson's comment about changing the college curriculum, made while he was president of Princeton University, is particularly apt of general education: reforming it "is as difficult as moving a graveyard." Committees can study the issue for ages and make numerous erudite reports, but when all is said and done, more is said than done. Many reforms meet the standard voiced by Groucho Marx: "there is less here than meets the eye." It is far easier to resist change and maintain the status quo than to build a consensus about what to do. The cause of this inertia is plain to administrators: getting faculty to collaborate on anything substantial is like herding cats. Faculty are professionally trained to be competitive, autonomous thinkers. While they may be experts in their own narrow fields of specialization, they are often ignorant of broader issues, educational or otherwise, and do not know how to take decisive action or act in concert with others.

Keywords

Dordt College, general education, educational change, values

Disciplines

Christianity | Higher Education | Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education

Comments

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GENERAL EDUCATION

Why Do We Need It, and Where Did It Come From?

Any serious fundamental change in the intellectual outlook of human society must necessarily be followed by an educational revolution. It may be delayed for a generation by vested interests or by the passionate attachment of some leaders of thought to the cycle of ideas within which they received their own mental stimulus at an impressionable age. But the law is inexorable that education to be living and effective must be directed to informing pupils with those ideas, and to creating for them those capacities which will enable them to appreciate the current thought of their epoch.

A. N. Whitehead on *The Mathematical Curriculum* in **Aims of Education**

To repeat, the crisis of liberal education is a reflection of a crisis at the peaks of learning, an incoherence and incompatibility among the first principles with which we interpret the world, an intellectual crisis of the greatest magnitude, which constitutes the crisis of our civilization. . . . Liberal education flourished when it prepared the way for the discussion of a unified view of nature and man's place in it, which the best minds debated on the highest level. It decayed when what lay beyond it were only specialties, the premises of which do not lead to any such vision.

Allan Bloom in **The Closing of the American Mind**

Introductory Remarks

General education is one of those things that everyone knows how to fix but no one is able to do anything about. Woodrow Wilson's comment about changing the college curriculum, made while he was president of Princeton University, is particularly apt of general education: reforming it "is as difficult as moving a graveyard." Committees can study the issue for ages and make numerous erudite reports, but when all is said and done, more is said than done. Many reforms meet the standard voiced by Groucho Marx: "there is less here than meets the eye." It is far easier to resist change and maintain the status quo than to build a consensus about what to do. The cause of this inertia is plain to administrators: getting faculty to collaborate on anything substantial is like herding cats. Faculty are professionally trained to be competitive, autonomous thinkers. While they may be experts in their own narrow fields of specialization, they are often ignorant of broader issues, educational or otherwise, and do not know how to take decisive action or act in concert with others.

This rather wry description, which some will fail to find any humor in, makes a trained historian of mathematics a bit nervous about discussing recent trends in general education. But knowing how this lecture series originated, I have nobody to blame but myself. Unless, of course, it is Professor Jech. Because I once took a graduate level complex analysis course from a well-known set theorist whose goal it was to prove the little-known conjecture that a set theorist could teach complex analysis. That may not mean too much to you, but I was impressed by the demonstration (he did just fine), and I thought the principle might carry over to some other areas.

Now, since I generally learn best when I'm getting ready to present my ideas to someone else, I thought this series would give me a good opportunity to learn something about the title of my talk: Why do we need general education? What purpose does it serve? Where did it come from, anyway? These are topics I thought the chair of the General Education Committee ought to know something about, and I thought it might not hurt if a few others on campus did likewise. So what I am about to tell you tonight is what I've discovered in the process of my study of these things. I think you will find much of it new and interesting, particularly as it sheds some light on what we've been doing in general education at Dordt College over the years. I have no doubt that some of you will be able to add to my second-hand observations or dispute my conclusions from your own experience or study. I'm familiar enough with the topic to know that some of my ideas need further development, and I welcome the opportunity

to learn more. You'll have a chance to respond at the end of tonight's talk, but you are also invited to join the General Education Committee this coming Thursday afternoon from 3:00 – 5:00 in the Board Room for a follow-up discussion of the implications of this year's lecture series.

My talk is organized chronologically. I will begin by describing what collegiate education was like before there was such a thing as general education. That will give us a context for understanding why general education was deemed necessary and where it came from. Then we will look at three waves of general education reform in the United States, concentrating most heavily on the last one. The first wave occurred right after World War I, the second rolled in after World War II, and the third gathered momentum after what might be called the War on the Establishment. At appropriate points, we will note some of the changes that general education went through at Dordt College. As you might expect from my timing of these reform movements (and as my lead quote above indicates; from a mathematician, I might add), educational change is closely tied to historical trends within society at large; it is not merely an internal affair promulgated by ambitious administrators seeking to carve their initials on the educational process. Each reform had its own answer to why general education is necessary and set forth its own vision and goals in response to various societal and educational stimuli. In the final parts of the talk, we will consider the current state of affairs in general education and see what we might learn about general education for our own situation at Dordt College.

Collegiate Education Before General Education Existed

Higher education in the United States was initially modeled on the English system. At the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, Christian gentlemen received a scholarly education in all the liberal arts. The intent was to prepare them to lead virtuous, civilized lives as future leaders of society. The moral and intellectual ideals of Western Culture were imbibed by a study of the classics, in their original languages; by imitating the style of the very best writers; and by training the mind through exercises in logic and mathematics. Such study would reveal Man's true humanity; it would ennoble the spirit while strengthening the mind. Forming the whole man was the aim of education, so that a graduate would be ready to assume cultural leadership in all respects, whatever the circumstances.

Harvard College was founded in 1636 to prepare an educated clergy. The Bible was acknowledged as the basis of the college, but the curriculum offered a liberal education much like that found in Old World England. The goal was to train Christians to be good citizens of this world as well as the next. At first each tutor or instructor taught all subjects to his class. In 1767, though, tutors began to specialize, teaching only a few subjects. This was the first shift toward a more specialized curriculum.

In the second half of the 19th century, two important changes occurred that radically transformed the educational landscape in the United States. First of all, in 1862 the Land Grant Act established schools of agriculture and engineering. This ended the monopoly of liberal arts institutions in higher education and brought more vocationally minded students into the educational system. It took another century before liberal arts institutions fought back (or succumbed, depending on your viewpoint) by incorporating such programs into their own curricula.

The second change is exemplified in the founding of Johns Hopkins University in 1876. This school was patterned after the newer German universities instead of on their English counterparts. The purpose of these institutions was not to produce cultured gentlemen, but to train specialists able to pursue original research in some chosen field of investigation. Following the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, the Enlightenment had witnessed the explosion of knowledge into many different branches of science. In the nineteenth century, which was an increasingly democratic age, these areas were now being pursued in the university rather

than by members of royal societies or individual researchers supported by nobility. Scholars were trained in particular subjects and found their supporting community among others who shared their professional interests. Their primary loyalty was not to an educational institution nor to their students, but to their studies. They were professors with Ph.D.s, not just teachers. Using their influence in the colleges, they introduced a wide variety of new courses, allowing students to choose most of what they wanted to study. Soon these courses were organized into majors, a concentration of various prescribed courses, in order to guarantee standards of rigor in a student's program. As time went on, the ideal of a liberal education was eroded, even at places like Harvard. The major became the real course of study; other studies were incidental. American colleges thus grafted a newer German research university onto an older British liberal arts university, with the former gaining the upper hand by the end of the nineteenth century.

Inauguration: The First Wave of General Education Reform

The upheaval of the First World War convinced some educators that certain elements of a liberal education, no longer emphasized in a research oriented university, should again play a more central role in the curriculum. College education should focus on the needs of students and society as well as on theoretical studies. It should help to civilize students and make them strive to achieve their full human potential; it should enable them to carry forward the ideals of Western Civilization. Concentrating on an academic specialty, while important, was recognized to be insufficient preparation for students called to live complex lives as whole people in contemporary society. In 1919, therefore, Columbia University pioneered a new emphasis on general education when it inaugurated its year long interdisciplinary course on Contemporary Civilization, originally called Peace Studies. The intent was to introduce students to the main intellectual and ideological pillars of Western Civilization so that they could assess current developments in society and combat those trends that were inimical to freedom. Columbia later also introduced year long courses in the humanities and in the natural sciences, thus setting the pattern of offering general education courses in each of the three main divisions of human thought.

In the 1920s, 30s, and 40s a number of other institutions followed Columbia's example. They, too, felt that the in-depth specialization of a major should be balanced by a broader understanding of human nature, society, and the natural world. Only in this way would students be prepared as citizens to further the ideals of a democratic society. This was accomplished in very different ways, however. It was often done by means of separate experimental colleges devoted to developing their own brand of general education. Some schools incorporated work experiences into the overall program, some mandated study of the Great Books, some used interdisciplinary seminars on contemporary issues. But all general education programs were designed to counter the narrowness spawned by having adopted the German model of a research university.

Was this move toward general education a throw-back to the old liberal education of the past? A reactionary attempt to recover the lost English ideal of a university? Was history repeating itself here? No. Some educators, indeed, longed for a return to the ideals of a liberal education, but their voices were eventually drowned out by the chorus of those promoting a more progressive and pragmatic vision of the university and of general education.

Consider some ways in which general education differs from liberal education. My description here will be overly simplistic, but it will capture the main tendencies of the two approaches.

Liberal education is premised upon the assumption that we can discover the true nature of man and society by examining the best of what the past has to offer. This is done by reading classical philosophical and literary writings and absorbing their thought patterns, culture, and ideals. General education examines the past, too, but only for the didactic historical purpose of understanding present and future events. It is more important to explore contemporary issues

and problems than to read what dead geniuses said about the nature of man or their world. Contemporary natural and social science give far more accurate knowledge about who man is and the true nature of his world than the writings of the ancients.

Both liberal education and general education are also concerned with educating the whole man, but this means very different things to them. Liberal education is holistic in its approach, treating those perennial issues of morality and rationality whose solution can form a basis for all vocations. General education, on the other hand, is more interdisciplinary in its approach. It takes the diverse perspectives of the various sciences for granted and offers a counterbalance to overspecialization and fragmentation by broadening students' exposure to the disciplines and encouraging integrated study. It accepts the ideal of specialized education, but it recognizes the need to provide coherence, unity, and breadth in the students' programs, particularly on the undergraduate level.

Given its outlook on truth, liberal education is content with prescribing a fixed canon of texts that all students must study. General education acknowledges the legitimate expansion of modern knowledge and is far less ready to dictate core subject matter that everyone should know. It tends instead to stipulate overarching goals, ideals, and methods rather than course content.

Naturally, many general education programs found room for various liberal education emphases. My analysis of the differences is not intended as a phenomenological one. I am analyzing opposing tendencies and pointing out the direction in which developments were heading. As time elapsed, more programs adopted the progressive outlook of general education. Advocates of liberal education, such as William Jellema from our own Calvinist tradition or Allan Bloom from contemporary secular university circles, begin to look more and more like vestiges from a distance past, a species headed for extinction.

Institutionalization: The Second Wave of General Education Reform

Between 1920 and 1945, a number of institutions adopted some form of general education. However, by its very nature, general education lacked the profile and prestige given to the disciplines. It was often viewed, I suspect, as an odd program off to the side, not as a curricular priority. A Second World War, however, alerted educators to the fact that they must become more pro-active with respect to general education if they wanted to see the ideals of the free world continue to flourish. General education would need to become a more important institutional concern and be better organized to accomplish its goals. Nothing less than the existence of Western Civilization hung in the balance. Saying this may strike us today like fun-house humor — teach students general education to save the world? — but I think the historical record after two world wars supports this outlook. It was time to get serious about general education.

Harvard took the lead in the second wave of general education reform. In 1945 a Harvard University committee published its famous redbook, *General Education in a Free Society*. Many institutions adopted the report's ideas and established general education programs in accord with them. Others developed different programs, but regardless of approach, general education as something distinct from a collection of specialized courses became a more important concern than it had been previously. The redbook even went so far as to propose a course of general studies for the high school level.

Harvard's report explicitly recognized a basic dilemma facing secular colleges and universities. On the one hand, there was a deep desire to promote the value system of Western Culture; on the other hand, educators understood both that public institutions should not force a set of values on its students and that there was no consistent set of ideals one could appeal to. The foundation of collegiate education had been gradually secularized since its inception. At one point, the schools could assume a common Christian heritage and base its program on biblical

ideas. However, this foundation was amalgamated with the liberal ideals of Western culture and thought, which eventually edged out the more explicitly Christian ideals. By the middle of the twentieth century, even Western ideals could no longer be asserted as a common foundation for study or for living in society. How could one promote the ideals of Western Culture when so many of them were in conflict with one another?

What is left is the somewhat hollow ideal of the dignity of man and the importance of human freedom, both individually and as a society: surely all people can agree with this. It is still necessary to present students with the heritage of Western Civilization so that they understand what forces shaped their world and so that they have a common focus to their study; but the ideals themselves, the truths that Western Civilization was built upon, cannot be officially recommended. What is more important is the inculcation of a scientific frame of mind so that students have the ability to transform their world in a rational manner and can transcend their individual prejudices and narrow backgrounds. Though the end results of rational reflection cannot be promoted, the process itself, the scientific method of inquiry, deserves our full allegiance because of its usefulness in a democratic society. Students must develop the critical sensibility needed to distinguish the expert from the quack, and they must be able to communicate their thoughts effectively.

The main threads tying general education together, therefore, are the common experience of a broad-based Western Civ course, the methodology of the natural and social sciences, and communication skills. Such a program will produce an enlightened citizenry able to discriminate what is good in conflicting value systems. It will qualify them to make wise decisions and engineer relevant cultural change. Rationalism gives way to pragmatism in the second wave of general education reform.

A New Kind of War: The Student Revolt of the Sixties

Demanding a strong general education program has always been far easier than putting it into effect and maintaining its vitality. Societal developments may put pressure on academia to make educational changes, but the academy itself suffers from immense inertia when it comes to changing a program that touches everyone. Not being under the supervision of any one department, it's easy for general education to be given short shrift. Those unfortunate enough to be assigned to teach in general education were nevertheless trained as specialists, and they have research interests that are usually unrelated in content or depth to such courses. The value of general education is something to give lip service to, but in actuality it is best for students to get it out of the way as soon as possible so that they can get down to the real business of collegiate education, studying the major. This idea is certainly not foreign to us; we often talk the same way today in advising students.

As time passed, the general education program took on the character of a disjoint collection of requirements chosen from a broad range of different fields, the content to be determined by each department that offered such a course. Parts of the program (usually humanities requirements) still carried forward some version of the old liberal arts vision of a well rounded education, while the social sciences and the natural sciences offered first chance or last chance survey courses in their fields of specialization. The coherence and relevance of all such requirements gradually evaporated, leaving only a set of hoops for students to jump through in order to get their degree. This description is exaggerated, of course, but that's how many students of my generation experienced it in the 60s and early 70s.

What was important to us were the events transpiring in the world outside: the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, the drug and music counterculture, Eastern mysticism, the growth of a global village. It was a time of rampant "Do Your Own Thing" individualism, a time of challenging the authority of the Establishment, which included everyone over 30. Students banded together in protests against the war, against Western Imperialism,

against racism, against sexism, against injustice wherever it was found. And they rejoiced in their common commitment to a new order of life where all would do as they pleased and live in harmony, to a culture of Woodstock forever.

The student counterculture made its presence felt throughout the academy, too. Everything was open for political debate and radical critique. College programs generally, and general education in particular, seemed useless for resolving the pressing problems of our age. Western Civ was the embodiment of parochial bigotry because it ignored the contributions of minorities and glamorized the atrocities of Western imperialism against other cultures. Natural science courses were irrelevant for anyone not entering the sciences or engineering and failed to acknowledge the social conditioning of all knowledge. The social sciences were no better; they were also too traditional and academic. Skills in communication were taught in isolation and had little connection to life in the real world or the students' immediate experiences. So much for the program that was going to rescue Western Culture from tyranny and oppression: it was itself a form of enslavement.

In response to the criticism of academic irrelevance, many institutions set up experimental programs and alternative colleges staffed by more radical faculty members. "Choice" became the slogan of the day: let students set up programs meaningful for them, chosen from a wide range of possibilities. Colleges and universities relaxed their requirements in general education, abandoning the concept of a core in favor of offering more alternatives.

The general education program lost what little structure and coherence it had when it admitted a large number of electives to suit different student needs. But that wasn't all that changed. The relative size of the general education curriculum decreased by nearly 25% during this same time period, from a national average of 43% in 1967 to 33% in 1974. (I promised no equations in the ads for my talk, so you'll have to do the calculations yourself to verify this figure.) The 1950s levels for general education were naturally higher than both of these. At Dordt, for instance, in 1963 when it first became a four year institution, general education formed more than half of a student's program, and almost all of the courses were prescribed. Two years later a bit more latitude was granted and the percentage slipped down to about 46%. By 1971, general education requirements dropped to nearly 30%, and students were invited to put their own program together. Only seven hours, English 101, Theology 101, and PE 10, were stipulated; the rest could be chosen from within specified disciplines or divisions. If that's what general education was like here at Dordt, you can imagine (or just remember) what it was like at a large university.

Other Challenges to General Education

Collegiate education had to contend with more than the attack from the new left. It also had to adjust to other societal realities. An important one was the changing demographic portrait of the incoming student during this time period, starting already in the late forties and fifties.

For one thing, more students who had traditionally entered the work force right after high school were now going on to college. Many of these students had lower academic credentials or were more career minded than students in an earlier era. To accommodate the new students' interests and abilities, numerous junior and community colleges sprang up. If students found that they were able to do college work, they could transfer to a regular college or university after two years. This gave colleges a certain number of new transfer students to integrate into their student body as upperclassmen, and it forced them to address the issue of credit for courses taken elsewhere.

Another response by colleges and universities to this changed student population was to adopt a more open admissions policy and to incorporate more technical and professional programs into their own curricular offerings. This became something of a trend in the seventies, particularly as schools saw their traditional clientele shrinking. This shift was due in part to a

more progressive view of the role of higher education — a pure liberal arts school would never stoop to such a move — but there were also more pragmatic reasons. The last of the baby boomers were bulging on through the educational system in the 1970s, and while the student pool was still climbing, schools could foresee an enrollment turndown looming in their future unless they remained responsive to current student demands. When the radical social idealism of the sixties gave way to the careerism of the seventies, adding vocational programs was the way to make colleges and universities more competitive with community colleges and ensure their viability for the future.

Dordt was not immune to these changes, though the rationale for offering new programs and the way in which they were integrated into the overall curriculum were different. Business administration was started in 1969, secretarial science in 1973, theatre arts and communication around 1975, library science in 1976, social work in 1977, agriculture in 1978, and engineering in 1979. In 1978 Dordt adopted a new statement of purpose. This document was intended to clarify and develop the principles of the older one, something whose necessity was brought home by the AACSB controversy earlier in the decade. But it was also needed to give an appropriate rationale for bringing more professional and vocational elements besides teacher education into an essentially liberal arts curriculum. The notion that bridged the gap between liberal arts and vocational training was that of serviceable insight. With the ideas developed in the late seventies, Dordt had a conceptual basis for adding whatever academic programs were needed to remain relevant to contemporary developments.

New programs such as those mentioned often came with a price: professional requirements imposed by outside accrediting agencies. This tended to make some of them into rather hefty majors. But given smaller and rather loose general education programs, this could usually be met by making some minor adjustments. The more traditional liberal arts courses — history, literature, philosophy — were sometimes seen as inappropriate for the newer students, but many of these courses had already been modified in the intervening years or could be bypassed by taking other courses.

Enfolding additional students into higher education kept colleges and universities booming, but it also made them more susceptible to social accountability. Now the business community had a greater stake in the outcome, and they didn't always like what they saw. The late seventies witnessed a strong reaction to radical university practices from the more conservative wing of the business, government, and educational sectors. Colleges and universities were taken to task for graduating students who were culturally illiterate and unable to perform well in their jobs due to inadequate communication skills (reading and writing deficiencies). These challenges resulted in a spirited public debate over the purpose and value of post-secondary education. The three publications that opened this forum on higher education were published in the same year, 1977. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching called general education “a disaster area” in its review of the *Missions of the College Curriculum*. It proposed moving away from a set of diffuse distribution requirements toward a more coherent program that reflected institutional objectives. In *Educating for Survival*, the United States Commissioner on Education, Ernest Boyer, and his assistant, Martin Kaplan, called for re-establishing a core curriculum. And Harvard University issued the report of its Task Force on the Core Curriculum, suggesting that their general education program needed more coherence and structure.

These documents were followed over the next few years by several national commission reports that pointed out various deficiencies in undergraduate education. In 1983 *Nation at Risk* was published by the Carnegie Foundation, unfavorably comparing performance of students in the United States with their counterparts in other parts of the industrialized world. William Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy* was published in 1984; Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* came out in 1987. This list of works is only a small sample of what has been written about American education since 1977; the public debate continues today and shows no

sign of abatement, even though (or maybe because) numerous educational reforms have been instituted in the meantime. What we are witnessing in part, I believe, is a struggle being played out between an older pragmatic, even rationalist, view of education and a newer, postmodernist vision, which seems to be gaining cultural power in the academy.

Professionalization: The Third Wave of General Education Reform

Given the various criticisms of undergraduate education in general and of general education in particular, how have the reformers of the eighties and nineties responded? In some fairly predictable ways, we'll see, given the circumstances and the players. The most notable thing about it all, though, may be the fact that general education is actually undergoing change aimed at strengthening instead of dismantling the program. Naturally, not much has changed at some places, and others are cautiously testing the waters of reform with modest, piecemeal changes, but some places have adopted rather sweeping, comprehensive changes. Supporting all of this activity there is a growing profession devoted to providing information and assistance on general education.

In response to criticisms that undergraduate education had become lax, most schools beefed up the size of their general education component. By 1980 the national average had climbed back up to nearly 40%, where it seems to have leveled off; this is still down from the heights of the sixties and earlier, but it is up from the trough of the early seventies. Schools also trimmed their curricular offerings for general education, sometimes drastically (Harvard went from around 800 (?) approved courses to 100), and they attempted to strengthen those parts that focused on basic communication and computation skills. They not only taught for competence, they also tested the results. Schools had the explicit consent of corporate America for these moves: business graduates needed to know how to read and write and figure better than their immediate predecessors. There was also a demand for increased knowledge of science and technology to keep the American economy competitive with Japan and Western Europe. Here the schools were less sure what to do in general education, and a variety of approaches were developed. Knowledge of history and the social sciences, along with philosophy, the arts, and foreign language, were also identified as important for business, though at a lower priority than quantitative and lingual proficiencies. But as international competition became more of a reality, the business sector increasingly recognized the value of having employees able to negotiate foreign cultures with a degree of sensitivity. Here, too, schools developed a wide variety of approaches.

As a movement, the third wave of general education reform lacks the overall uniformity of the previous one. Harvard was no longer the model for higher education that it had been after the Second World War. Each school considered the options and then tried to design a curriculum that suited its own situation and needs. As retrenchment became a reality in the eighties, programs were cut and staff had to be let go. In this sobering climate, colleges and universities re-examined their mission and outlined their vision of education for the future in order to carve out a niche for themselves in the dwindling pool of students. General education had to contribute to the task adopted for the college as a whole. That meant giving it more definition and coherence in the context of the institution's strategic or long range plan.

Yet while there is a good deal of variation in today's reformed general education programs, there are also some common features that can be discerned. As before, I will have to highlight certain trends at the expense of others, but I will focus on what seems to me to be the culturally dominant developments.

Most public institutions acknowledge that what previously passed for general education was too amorphous, but they still find that they are unable to require much of a common core beyond basic skills courses. Factual knowledge in the natural and social sciences continues to grow exponentially, and the parts of it that are relevant to contemporary society is changing too

fast to be able to nail down a body of knowledge that every educated person should be familiar with. With respect to the humanities or courses that attempt to teach about beliefs, values, and ideals, it is not even appropriate to dictate what should be taken by all students. Values and attitudes are important, again, but the best that can be done here is to adopt some very general objectives, and require courses to demonstrate that they address them in some way. Such guidelines often leave an institution with little more than a distribution requirement in the end, but the intent is to circumscribe the program so that it attains a modicum of cohesion and structure without sacrificing the flexibility students and profs have come to expect.

What goals and objectives, what values, can function as a foundation for a contemporary general education program? What should the general education program be designed to accomplish? As we've just observed, it can't be used to develop a common vision of our task in the world. That presupposes a uniformity of outlook that cannot be assumed and certainly can't be imposed. Even schools with a homogeneous student body and faculty are sometimes hesitant to assert a shared basis, lest they end up indoctrinating their students instead of educating them. But aren't there any ideals that we all have in common, a rational basis on which to build character for public life in today's world? Take a look around you. What would they be? Christian values? They've been repudiated long ago. The ideals of Western Culture? Given the social revolution of the sixties and seventies and the ideological conflicts swirling around us in the West, who would still claim them as a firm foundation? Certainly not the last generation of radical students, who are today's faculty. And not today's students, either. We are increasingly a society adrift, splintered into enclaves of opposing special interest groups. The center does not hold; our modern culture is gradually disintegrating. I don't think it requires a very long viewpoint anymore to realize that Dooyeweerd and others were right: we are living in the twilight of Western Civilization. It is easy for us in Northwest Iowa to forget the essential bankruptcy of our secular culture until we begin moving about in circles outside our own.

One of the few intellectual threads tying current curricular innovations together seems to be a commitment to some form of post-modernist relativism. We can all adhere to the belief that each person and culture has its own authenticity, its own truth. General education must get this message across to those who take it: there are no absolutes to appeal to, only my ideas and yours. Each person's preferences and orientations are just as legitimate as anyone else's. All cultures are valid expressions of our humanity. None of them may be judged from the perspective of any other, and there is no way to transcend them. These ideas are the natural outgrowth of previous developments. The students of the sixties are now the educational reformers of the eighties and nineties. The radical perspectives that were accommodated in special programs during their student days are now being injected into the mainstream of the curriculum, especially in general education. Feminist and minority viewpoints are insisted upon in Western Civ courses (where such are still a mainstay of the curriculum), and they inform the agenda in many literature and philosophy courses as well. The bastions of liberal education are now inhabited by some of its earlier critics, who are determined to remake them according to their own image of cultural pluralism.

Adherence to multiculturalism is replacing allegiance to Western Culture as the true soul of innovative higher education. General education can help you articulate your own world view and encourage you to develop your decision base and your life style in the context of contemporary events and perspectives, but respect for your personhood means it will not try to shape them or judge them. This viewpoint has one absolute, and that is universal toleration for all cultural diversity. The flip side of this is that there is no room in the modern university for people or ideologies that are in any way intolerant of other groups or value systems. Christianity, for example, cannot truly be tolerated because it holds that its value system has been designed and revealed by God and thus is correct while others are wrong. Ironically, as Allan Bloom is happy to point out, cultural relativism turns out to be guilty of the very thing it despises: parochialism. A genuine understanding of other cultures recognizes that only the latest version

of secularized Western thought believes that values and truth are relative.

The relativism of post-modernism may be strongest in the arts and humanities, but it is not confined to them. It has also made inroads in the natural and social sciences. There, too, there is no fixed body of truth to pass on to the next generation. Students should be made generally familiar with what earlier people thought about society and the natural world, and they should know what the current thinking is in these areas, but they should also know that all knowledge is culturally conditioned. There is no such thing as objective certain knowledge, not even in the physical sciences. All knowledge embodies some of the ideals and prejudices of its practitioners. Positivist philosophy of science is out, especially since Thomas Kuhn published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1962. Students should be exposed to a range of different sciences so they can become familiar with the various modes of human inquiry and so they can assess the validity and limitations of these methods for making informed decisions about today's problems.

General education is supposed to be the program that provides students with a common set of experiences, that transcends diverse specialties and molds students and faculty into an academic community. This is clearly a feature emphasized and sought in contemporary reforms. I doubt, however, that practicing a common set of skills, being exposed to similar methodologies, and being encouraged to be tolerant of others' ideas while developing your own value system provides a sufficient basis for true community, either in school or society at large. Reformers realize this; they also propose other ways to knit the academic community and the educational program together. Freshman year experiences, interdisciplinary courses, integrated seminars on contemporary issues, collaborative learning strategies; all these provide important additional connections and help make general education more coherent. Good things in themselves, things we can learn from as Christian educators; but they still don't compensate for the lack of a genuine basis, for the clashing diversity of viewpoints on the most fundamental levels. Without a unifying intellectual framework, a common mind, how much real integration can take place? The reformers themselves realize that while unity is a goal to be aimed for, competing perspectives may mean that only modest connections will ever be achieved.

The Current State of General Education Reform

General education reform has now become somewhat of an established enterprise in the United States. The number of schools undertaking reform of some sort since 1977 is in the hundreds and includes all manner of institutions. The surprising thing, judged by earlier developments and the magnitude of the task, is that the third wave of general education reform is making some real changes and that it still has not died out. I think this is due to two reasons. For one thing, too much is at stake in American society to let the moment pass without trying to effect some sorely needed improvements in the quality of undergraduate education. But secondly, I think general education is in the process of being converted from its earlier rationalist, pragmatic form into a postmodernist one. Such an evolution, where it is occurring, does not happen overnight or without a struggle.

All this ferment has been fueled by a small industry devoted to the goals of general education reform. The Association of American Colleges (now the Association of American Colleges and Universities) has been in the forefront in promoting this change. Its landmark 1985 booklet *Integrity in the College Curriculum* provided a philosophical framework for the work of many institutions and a springboard for further developments. Its most recent publication in this area is titled *Strong Foundations: Twelve Principles for Effective General Education Programs* (1994). This booklet, written to keep the spirit of reform alive, documents the principles that underlie a number of successful general education reforms. I've summarized these for you at the end of your lecture outline. A vast number of other pamphlets, reports, journal articles, and books have also been published in the last decade and a half, offering suggestions and advice

and case studies on general education reform. Yearly conferences in several locales as well as seminars and week long workshops are offered in numerous topics related to general education. Educators now have a variety of ways they can address the problems identified by the critics of general education. Resources are readily available to any institution that wants to reform some aspect of its curriculum.

During this same time period, two other educational forces have been unleashed that reinforce the process of general education reform. The first of these is outcome assessment. Many colleges and universities have now been mandated by accrediting agencies or state legislatures to develop assessment programs that validate how well they meet their stated goals. This has forced many institutions to review their mission statements and determine how all educational programs ought to contribute to meeting the institution's goals and objectives. General education reform is often a by-product of such activities.

The second force is that of program evaluation. As educators began to discuss the aims of general education, they soon realized that it was unrealistic to ask the general education program to bear the whole burden of making the multiversity into a university, of building a community of scholars. Majors and other programs should also be organized to give students a picture of the whole and should contain connected learning experiences. They, too, should be accountable to the institution and should help fulfill its mission; they should not be responsible only to external professional organizations whose main interest is to promote research. This trend to make programs responsive to institutional parameters and objectives is a more recent development, but as it grows, it will undoubtedly yield collateral reforms in general education, too.

Implications of General Education Reform for Us Today

I'd like to conclude my talk by exploring some implications of what we've learned from general education reform. Maybe you think the only conclusion we can draw from recent developments is not to participate in curricular reform at all because it promotes a decidedly non-Christian viewpoint. But that's not a conclusion we should draw.

What I tried to do in my historical review was to test the spirits behind the main trends in general education. That led to a negative assessment of certain tendencies, even though they contain some fairly good ideas. I do not want to be misconstrued as saying that none of those ideas are worth exploring. I only wanted to point out that certain agendas have led to certain forms of general education. And I want us to ask the question, what is our agenda as a Christian college, and what should flow out of that? What is most central for us, and how should we organize our program? We should do this to keep our program consistent with our mission and to be on guard against uncritically adopting the most recent fads in higher education, such as multiculturalism.

But we profess to be Reformed Christians, to work out of a reformational mindset. That means that we neither reject the wheel outright nor that we reinvent it for ourselves every time we need to get rolling. Once we establish our priorities, we can evaluate what others are doing and learn from them. Our approach should not be avoidance or eclectic accommodation, but reformation. We should ask, what have our secular counterparts discovered, even as they attempt to deny the truth? How has the creation, in this case the educational process, which God governs by his Word, molded their ideas and understandings? As reformed educators, we ought to consciously interact with what is happening outside our walls, even if it is diametrically opposed to our viewpoint.

So what can we learn from the history of general education reform? Let me offer a few broad conclusions and invite you to add some of your own.

First, I think it's clear that general education has always been a response to important educational and societal needs, needs that specialized programs were unable to address. Re-

vitalizing general education has been American higher education's response to several major crises: to two world wars, to student revolts, and to global economic competition. There may be good internal reasons for considering educational reform, but usually it is external events that trigger people to rethink their programs.

General education is still being reformed today in order to make the current curriculum more responsive to contemporary needs and outlooks. Reformers are not interested in reform simply because they enjoy changing things and making life miserable for those who don't (though that may be true); the task is too arduous and life is too short for such silliness. Important issues are at stake. Is the rising generation being adequately prepared to take up the monumental challenges they will inherit? Can we give them any better equipment for the task? Are we getting through to them with what we're offering, or can we deliver it more effectively?

Students need to confront the problems of the day in the general education program. In this connection, an emphasis on multiculturalism is important. Today's world has been internationalized. Today's students will have a harder time remaining closeted within their own subcultures; they will have to learn how to deal with other cultures and value systems. As Christians, we cannot accept the cultural relativism of the secular approach, but we cannot avoid facing the issue, either. We are called to live in a culturally diverse society as members of God's body, a body in which who we are ultimately does not matter. There are other pressing problems that should also be addressed: the environmental crisis, poverty and injustice, alienation and loss of community, technological explosion, and so on. Some of these topics may be taken up by more specialized programs, but they should also be given the broader venue that general education is able to offer.

General education should also help students develop the basic competencies they need to live in today's world. As the world changes, so will the skills they need. Those that are not addressed in more specialized programs should be treated in the general education program.

Secondly, I think general education needs the same degree of structure and organization as the more specialized programs we offer. If the general education program is to accomplish what it is supposed to do, it should be designed as a cohesive program, not as a collection of distribution requirements whose main goals are to guarantee breadth and give all the departments or divisions a piece of the pie. Current educational reforms strive for wholeness and for an integrated program. Christian colleges have the ability to accomplish this where others will fail. The general education program should provide a foundation and a context for other programs. It should help students see the interconnectedness and the relevance of their studies.

The goals of general education are somewhat different from those of the disciplines, and its faculty may have to go against the grain of their professional training and research interests. This requires ongoing institutional support and encouragement. Faculty need opportunities to develop new ways of thinking about material and new ways of teaching it. If we want a strong and vital general education program to complement the disciplines and prepare students for contemporary life in society, we will have to work at it. It means reaffirming and honing our vision; it means incorporating better ways of teaching and new emphases that we may have overlooked earlier; and it may mean readjusting our curricular priorities.

Times change and so do faculty and students. Each academic community must make the mission of the college and the goals of general education its own if it is to have an effective program. Faculty who teach general education courses need to be committed to its goals and know how their course fits into the overall program. Otherwise our educational slogans — no religious neutrality, sphere sovereignty, serviceable insight, integration — can become so much hot air, and we all just do our own thing and let the students put their programs together for themselves.

In this wave of general education reform, colleges and universities have concluded that a strong general education program requires a separate administrative structure. The program should not be run by a full time administrator, or the faculty will not own it; and it can't be

run by the faculty as a whole. Most schools today are setting up faculty committees, sometimes under a director of general education, whose sole purpose it is to oversee the program and be its advocate. Such a committee should not take as its motto, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” but “semper reformandum.” The general education committee should think creatively so it can make general education the best program it can be. Its members should be willing to press the institution to consider new ideas and stimulate change in a responsible manner.

To maintain a strong program, universities and colleges realize that they have to keep in touch with it. Program assessment should be an integral part of supervising the program. General education is not something you can decide once for all and put in the bag. It’s not a watch that can be started and left to tick; it’s a plant that needs care and attention to remain strong and healthy. Courses should be examined on a periodic basis to determine their continuing value for the program. And the overall structure of the program should be evaluated to see if it meets institutional expectations.

The third thing we can learn from current general education reforms is that students are as important as subject matter. We need to pay closer attention to who it is we’re educating. What sorts of students are now entering college? Where are they when they arrive? What subculture do they inhabit? What courses or experiences will help them develop their knowledge base, their ability to apply certain intellectual skills, and their attitudes towards others and the world around them? How can students be encouraged to develop their talents in ways that will be useful to the community at large? Freshman–orientation–to–college courses, learning / living environments, experiential service components are all aimed at addressing this set of concerns.

Pedagogy is another part of this. Are students well served by large classes in courses where we are trying to get the overall vision of the college across? Or where we are trying to model the way to deal with contemporary issues? Can students be actively engaged in their general education courses if the principal mode of delivery is the lecture? What learning styles should be incorporated into each course? Current reforms are reconsidering these matters to see what practical options there might be to present practices.

Given all these developments, how does Dordt’s current general education program fare? Well, I see that my time is run out, so this part of the talk will have to wait for another day. No; I’ll say a few things, but I won’t get too specific at this point. Dordt seems to have gotten in on the last wave of general education reform near the beginning, though I suspect that was partly coincidence. In 1983, after about 8 years of preparation, Dordt moved away from a very loose set of general education requirements to what we have today. How well does our program match what is going on elsewhere? We have moved in similar directions to other schools with our changes, especially with developments since 1983. However, I think there are a number of things we can learn from other schools: about giving our program more internal structure; about making our program more relevant to contemporary issues; about integrating courses and skills and student life; about assessing the program; about paying more attention to students and pedagogy.

Is my overall assessment of our present general education program that we need to dump it and start over? Of course not; you can’t live in a house that’s being bulldozed. Should we think about changing some things over the next ten years? Yes. What we each think they are may vary from person to person; I may feel differently myself a month or two from now as I continue to learn more about the program. But what we need is an openness to discuss the issue and to consider the alternatives. We need to share our vision of the educational task and show respect for one another’s insights and abilities. What’s finally at stake is not my course or yours, but the students’ education. General education can be a powerful program for getting our perspective across. Let’s do the best job we can with the insight we have today, knowing we may be able to do better tomorrow. And let’s keep our eyes open to what is happening around us so we can learn from others.