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Understanding General Education in the Community College: A National Study

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Two-year colleges are the democratic gateway to higher education in the U.S., welcoming the mainstream and the marginalized, accommodating the complex lives of its diverse array of students, and widening the road to economic and social mobility for those who might not otherwise have access to higher learning. General education (GE) curricula constitute at least half of most associate degrees and provide the foundational core for higher education as well as preparation for students to live well and responsibly in the world before them. Situated on the first rungs of the undergraduate curricular ladder, community college GE programs offer the first taste of postsecondary education to millions of students each year. These GE offerings must align closely with GE programs in students' targeted transfer institutions or risk wasting students' resources and thwarting their goals.

GE has been a valued priority in community colleges since the 1950s, and the authors of this article have been its advocates for decades. In fall 2020, we undertook a national study of GE programs in community colleges. Our purpose was to gain a current understanding of the status of these programs in light of the massive reform movements to increase equitable student success that have swept U.S. two-year institutions in recent years.

Methodology

Our approach for this study was to review GE philosophy statements, requirements, and approved GE course offerings from the most recent physical and web-based catalogs of a random, stratified sample of 30 community colleges. The population from which we sampled was the most recent listing of U.S. public two-year, associate degree-granting colleges—excluding specialized institutions designated as technical, tribal, and special focus institutions—identified by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (CCIHE). We drew samples from subgroups of two-year colleges categorized by CCIHE as large/very large (5,000 or greater full-time equivalent [FTE] enrollment), medium (2,000-4,999 FTE), and small/very small (1,999 or fewer FTE). We also examined expectations regarding GE from the seven regional accreditation commissions to explore whether these were reflected in college GE philosophy statements and offerings.

Findings

Common Philosophies of General Education

Almost two-thirds of the community colleges we examined provided a statement of their philosophy of GE. We found great concurrence in these expressions, irrespective of institutional size. Most described the purpose of their GE programs in lofty terms about preparing students for whatever the world, their lives, or the future might bring, as in these examples:

"The General Education program provides a foundation in the knowledge and skills needed to develop a life of personal fulfillment and contribution to society."

"The purpose of the general education core is to ensure that college students have the broad knowledge and skills to become lifelong learners in a global community that will continue to change."

"General education seeks to assist students in obtaining the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enhance quality of life and the ability to function effectively in an ever-changing society."

In their GE philosophy statements, most colleges made it clear that their intention was to offer a common core of knowledge and skills needed by *all* students. This emphasis on the commonality was conveyed in frequently found language, such as "a common body of knowledge," "skills that are deemed to be commonly shared," and "common to all students regardless of major." A handful of institutions stated that their GE programs were tied to their overarching institutional learning outcomes and offered a list of learning goals that would be gained from completing their GE core. Only one college specified which learning goals each GE course was designed to advance. None explained whether or how the fulfillment of these goals would be monitored or measured.

Overall, we found little evidence that the philosophical ideals described for GE programs translated to cohesive, integrated bodies of knowledge. After the grand descriptions, most colleges either offered broad lists of courses from which students were instructed to choose or referred students to the catalog lists of all courses in particular disciplines:

- Choose 1 course from List A. Choose 2 courses from Lists B and C.
- Select any two courses from the following disciplines: Anthropology, Economics, Geography, History, Political Science, Psychology, Social Science, Sociology.

Beyond their GE philosophy and lists, several colleges added astoundingly convoluted explanations of their GE programs, such as the following from a medium-sized college:

"The General Education Curriculum (AGEC) is a general education certificate that fulfills lower-division general education requirements for students planning to transfer to any public community college or university in the state. Generally, the AGEC transfers as a block without loss of credit. The AGEC-A and AGEC-B require a minimum of 35* credit hours, and the AGEC-S requires a minimum of 36* credit hours. In most cases, all courses used to satisfy the AGEC will apply to graduation requirements of the university major for which the AGEC was designed. There are three types of AGECS in the district: AGEC-A, AGEC-B, and AGEC-S. As described below, these AGECS are also a component of most associate degrees and comparable degrees at other public community colleges in the state. The AGEC-A defines the general education requirements in the Associate in Arts (AA), Associate in Arts, Elementary Education (AAEE), and the Associate in Arts, Fine Arts (AAFA) degrees. The AGEC-B defines the general education requirements in the Associate in Business-General Requirements (ABUS-GR) and Associate in Business-Special Requirements (ABUS-SR) degrees. The AGEC-S defines the general education requirements in the Associate in Science (AS) degree."

A number of colleges devoted from 5 to 13 catalog pages to outlining byzantine options for multiple sets of GE requirements that students need to complete, depending on their targeted transfer institutions. No doubt, such contract-like language was aimed at guiding students to make good decisions and avoid loss of credit upon transfer. Colleges seemed to know that such lengthy, jargon-laden information was befuddling to students, as it was often accompanied by warnings such as this one (in all caps): "IT IS STRONGLY RECOMMENDED THAT STUDENTS CONSULT WITH A COUNSELOR BEFORE MAKING FINAL ACADEMIC/VOCATIONAL DECISIONS." Our concern with these complexities is how few community colleges have sufficient advisors or counselors to provide the individualized guidance students would need to wade through these murky waters, especially during the limitations and pressure of registration periods.

General Education and Accreditation

Colleges often made clear the connections between their GE programs and accreditation requirements. We found frequent references to accreditation obligations in GE philosophy statements or descriptions, and we confirmed all seven regional accrediting commissions have requirements addressing GE for their member institutions. GE expectations from accreditors are similar in spirit and largely nonprescriptive, apart from calling for colleges to establish broad areas of knowledge to be attained by all undergraduate students. Following are edited statements from the regional accrediting commissions that are quite clear about the need for a common core of knowledge:

Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) Western Association of Schools and Colleges

The institution defines and incorporates into all of its degree programs a substantial component of general education designed to ensure breadth of knowledge and promote intellectual inquiry. The general education component includes an introduction to some of the major areas of knowledge. General education courses are selected to ensure students achieve comprehensive learning outcomes.

Higher Learning Commission (HLC)

The institution has a program of general education that is grounded in a philosophy or framework developed by the institution or adopted from an established framework. It imparts broad knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and develops skills and attitudes that the institution believes every college-educated person should possess.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)

In institutions that offer undergraduate education, a general education program must be free standing or integrated into academic disciplines, that offers a sufficient scope to draw students into new areas of intellectual experience, expanding their cultural and global awareness and cultural sensitivity, and preparing them to make well-reasoned judgments outside as well as within their academic field.

New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE)

The general education requirement is coherent and substantive. It embodies the institution's definition of an educated person and prepares students for the world in which they will live.

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)

Consistent with its mission, the institution establishes and assesses, across all associate and bachelor level programs or within a General Education curriculum, institutional learning outcomes and/or core competencies.

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)

Collegiate-level educational programs emphasize both breadth and depth of student learning. The structure and content of a program challenges students to integrate knowledge and develop skills of analysis and inquiry. General education is an integral component of an undergraduate degree program through which students encounter the basic content and methodology of the principal areas of knowledge.

WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)

Undergraduate programs engage students in an integrated course of study of sufficient breadth and depth to prepare them for work, citizenship, and lifelong learning.

All seven regional accreditors specify the need for a GE program—or a defined and measured set of core competencies—for undergraduate programs. Most define a minimum GE course credit requirement for associate degrees, ranging from 15 to 20 semester credits, but allow for alternatives to coursework for demonstration of GE competencies. For example, HLC’s policy calls for meeting its GE requirement through either “a traditional practice of distributed curricula (15 semester credits for AAS degrees, 24 for AS or AA degrees, and 30 for bachelor’s degrees) or through integrated, embedded, interdisciplinary, or other accepted models that demonstrate a minimum requirement equivalent to the distributed model” (section B.1.h).

All seven regional accreditors stipulate domains of knowledge in their GE requirements, standards, or assessment protocols. Four explicitly call for inclusion of arts and humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics. Three specify communication skills, critical thinking (also called critical analysis and reasoning/logical thinking), human/cultural diversity, and information literacy. All compel GE programs to demonstrate broad and substantive learning—typically framed as breadth and depth—based on a cohesive or coherent curricular framework. For example, WSCUC calls for engaging students in “an integrated course of study of sufficient breadth and depth to prepare them for work, citizenship, and life-long learning” (Standard 2.2a).

Common GE Requirements

We found that community colleges, on average, required students to select 12 courses from a mixed bag of 162 approved courses to meet their GE requirements. Requirements varied from a low of 9 to a high of 16 required GE courses, but most institutions called for 10 to 13 GE courses. Table 1 lists the ranges and average numbers of GE courses required in each of the large, medium, and small colleges in the study.

Table 1: Required and Approved General Education Courses by Institutional Size of U.S. Community Colleges

Average Number of GE Courses	Large Colleges	Medium Colleges	Small Colleges
Required	12	12	12

Approved	181	203	102
OVERALL AVERAGE			
12 required GE courses from 162 approved GE courses			

Note: Nearly a third of colleges expressed GE requirements in terms of credit hours/units; these were converted to numbers of required courses based on average units for approved courses.

Most striking were the number and range of course options approved to meet the dozen required GE courses. GE course offerings ranged from 49 to 491 in large colleges, from 68 to 372 in medium colleges, and from 58 to 223 in small colleges. Bear in mind, these are specifically approved courses (not electives) that colleges required students to sort through and choose a handful of to attain an associate degree and the purported ideal of being educated members of society.

Common Subject Matter Categories

All the colleges included in the study organized their GE requirements by subject matter categories, which fell into five major areas most commonly named Arts and Humanities, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Natural Sciences, Communication and Composition, and Mathematics. We found strong similarities in the number of required courses within each of the five major areas, but great variety in the numbers of options offered within categories, as noted in Table 2.

Table 2: Required and Approved General Education Courses by Subject Areas of U.S. Community Colleges

General Education Subject Areas	Average Number of GE Courses	
	Required	Approved
Arts & Humanities	3	55
Social & Behavioral Sciences	2	33
Natural Sciences	2	28
Communication & Composition	3	8
Mathematics	1	10

Colleges tended to offer the most GE course options in Arts and Humanities and the fewest in Communication and Composition and Mathematics. On average, large- and medium-sized colleges offered about the same number of choices for each GE subject area, and significantly more in each category than did small colleges. Nonetheless, in each subject area, we found colleges of all sizes offering very high and very low numbers of GE course options. In Arts and Humanities colleges offered from 10 to 167 courses to meet the three-course requirement, but most offered more than 10 times the number of courses required. In Social and Behavioral Sciences, six medium colleges, two large colleges, and one small college approved 50 or more courses to meet a two-course requirement. We found more consistency in course offerings in Natural Sciences with large, medium, and small colleges averaging 31, 33, and 21 course offerings, respectively. Still, colleges listed as few as five and as many as 91 science course options from which students must pick two courses to fulfill this GE requirement.

Colleges treated the knowledge areas of Communication and Composition and Mathematics more prudently, placing limits on options from which students could choose. More than half offered no choice among their required English composition/rhetoric or speech courses. All 30 colleges required a single college-level mathematics course for degree completion to be selected from one or two options available to most students.

The highest number of GE courses for three of the subject categories were found in medium-sized colleges. Small colleges generally listed fewer GE course options. However, all the small colleges offered more GE courses than two large colleges in the study. Clearly, institutional size was not the only determinant of how many GE course options were presented to students.

Conclusions

We found a great deal of agreement on the statements of GE philosophy between individual college statements and accreditation commission statements. Core concepts were repeated by both groups: breadth and depth, foundational, integrated, core competencies, skills and knowledge, intellectual concepts and inquiry, cross disciplinary, common core for all students, personal fulfillment and social contribution, and lifelong learning.

A student, parent, faculty member, or member of an accrediting team reading these statements would be impressed with the scope and purpose of GE in the nation's community colleges. Students graduating from an integrated and cohesive GE program based on these philosophical statements would be so well prepared to live a good life and make a good living that American undergraduate education would be the envy of the world. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

Although GE as originally conceived from the 1940s through the 1970s attempted to create integrated and cohesive programs—common cores of learning—to fulfil the philosophy of GE, such programs no longer exist and there is no such plan on the reform agenda. Today, the traditional distributed structuring of GE programs, in which students pick one of these, plus two of those, and two of these others—dubbed the “cafeteria curriculum”—is the dominant form of GE—a smorgasbord of hundreds of courses from which students must select 10 to 15 courses to be labeled “college educated.”

Across all 30 colleges in this study, we found strong agreement in their stated philosophies about GE supported by strong agreement among the seven regional accrediting commissions. Most community colleges expect students to complete 12 GE courses: three in Arts and Humanities, two in Social and Behavioral Sciences, two in Natural Sciences, three in Communication and Composition, one in Mathematics, and one in an additional area (e.g., History, Diversity, Physical Education, Student Success, Technology, Lifelong Learning).

The greatest differences we found were in the array of approved GE course offerings—the number and variety of courses colleges designated as options for meeting those commonly held GE requirements. Depending on where they enrolled, students could encounter 49 or 491 courses to meet a 12-course GE requirement, and these variations could not be explained solely by college size. The colleges with the lowest and the highest number of GE course offerings were both large institutions. Small colleges offered significantly fewer GE options on average than large and medium-sized colleges, but three small colleges offered over 100 GE course options and one listed 223 options for its 11 GE requirements.

With common philosophies and common GE accreditation expectations, the rationale for these 10-fold differences in course offerings among like-sized institutions thwarted our initial sensemaking. The explanatory pattern that emerged fell along the lines of state higher education governance structures. Consistently, colleges in states with strong centralized governance systems, including a mandatory general education core and designated (or state-approval of) GE courses, offered far fewer GE course options than those in states affording strong local control and faculty autonomy.

From low to high, however, all colleges in the study approved at least four times more GE courses than they required, and most had students choose from pools of courses 14 times larger than they required. Despite abundant claims about promoting a common core of GE, our findings point to the reality that the nation's current community college GE programs continue to cultivate the cafeteria curriculum.

Implications

No matter the size of the college, the big takeaway from this study is clear—the great glut of required GE courses and long lists of course offerings from which students must choose to meet those requirements puts unhealthy pressure on students and inhibits colleges from living up to their ideals. On average, community college students are required to select 12 key courses—deemed critical to their educational, personal, and professional success—from a haystack of 162.

Cafeteria curriculum was the universal approach used by community colleges in this study and is the dominant GE model in higher education today. Despite its endurance, this approach is laden with criticism of lacking integration, promoting turf protection, encouraging students to seek easy options, and promoting silos in thinking and organizational structure. Some say the intent embedded in its loosely coupled, self-service approach to GE requirements is not clear to students, who tend to view it as a checklist or find it irrelevant and a waste of their time and money. Indeed, the medley of GE courses put forth by most colleges in this study belied the guiding presence of an integrated and intentionally structured GE philosophy.

It is likely that the cafeteria curriculum emerged like the innocent introduction of what we now understand to be invasive species in a local ecosystem—a well-meaning English ivy placed here, a clump of bamboo there, a water hyacinth in the pond. Each a lovely specimen. Each an answer to some unmet need or proclivity. But over time, they proliferate, choke out native plants, and obscure all traces of the original design. The GE jungles in most community colleges are the overgrowth of archetypal curricular plans with layers of additions over many, many years. Faculty and administrators alike are working within fields they inherited. Attempts to alter the plan would require an iron mandate from on high or a powerfully compelling rationale as well as experienced and courageous leaders from all ranks to do needed weeding or provide vision for a new plot.

President Woodrow Wilson said, "It is easier to move a cemetery than to change the curriculum." A wit added, "In either case, you get no help from the residents." Curricular reform in GE has amounted to little more than trimming the branches of a dead tree and broadcasting handfuls of seeds on barren ground. Across the nation, inspiring work is underway in community colleges to build intentional pathways to guide student success, eradicate long-standing equity barriers like mandatory placement exams, and streamline academic pipelines from high school through university transfer to the workplace. But there appears to be little motivation or incentive to reform the GE jungle in most two-year colleges. If faculty and administrative leaders will not take responsibility for this effort, the

community college we know today and the community college we need for the future may never come to full bloom.

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