The list of obstacles to general education is lengthy and complex. In the face of such obstacles, is there hope for the revitalization of general education?

Obstacles to General Education

Terry O'Banion
Ruth G. Shaw

Almost as soon as general education is mentioned, someone will begin to list the reasons why it will never work. This phenomenon is unique to general education; no one will readily tick off the obstacles to vocational education or will even claim that beleaguered liberal education would be a great idea if only it could be put into practice. Unfortunately, it is much easier to list the barriers to general education in the community college than to describe the factors that support the movement. The driving forces often appear to be fragile balloons full of theoretical hot air, while statements of the restraining forces are as precise, as pointed, and as lethal as pins.

Critics of general education charge that it has been a movement propelled too often by soft-headed idealists with bleeding hearts. The critics style themselves, in contrast, as pragmatists, and they point with pride to the success of career education as a specific solution to a specific problem. If believers in general education are ever to respond to their critics, they must understand the nature of the obstacles that lie before them.

Many of the barriers to general education in the community college are intangible, despite the fact that they can be stated precisely. These obstacles are powerful because they are rooted in the respective

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histories and philosophies that undergird the general education movement and the community college institution. A related collection of impediments includes those pertaining to the organization and delivery of general education. A third set of obstacles relates to community college staff, while a fourth cluster of problems is tied to the characteristics of community college students. External and societal forces comprise yet another group of difficulties. Despite these formidable obstacles, the quest for general education in the community college continues, as its advocates explore new avenues to overcome old barriers.

Intrinsic Conflicts

The most powerful obstacles are always those will-o'-the-wisps called ideas. Much of the reason for resistance to or lack of enthusiasm for general education in the community college can be traced to a perceived conflict between the institutional philosophy and the historical underpinnings of general education.

Access vs. Elitism. Like it or not, general education is frequently confused with liberal education. This confusion results in the fairly widespread belief that there is something at least vaguely elitist about general education that makes it improper as a fundamental mission of the community college. Proponents of the general education movement face an audience that has grown accustomed to dividing the world of credit courses into hemispheres of academic and occupational.

Furthermore, the community college prides itself upon its attention to and accommodation of individual differences, while general education is predicated on the notion of commonality of learning. It seems only fair to observe that "democracy's college" should embrace the Jacksonian idea that all its students might benefit from some common learning, but perhaps the rub develops when the precise nature of that learning must be defined. A Jeffersonian elitism creeps into the educational garden of equality.

Pragmatism vs. Idealism. From the outset, the community college movement has been a pragmatic one. It was a practical solution to a practical problem, designed to bypass the theoretical, often impractical, folderol of academe. It is a blue-collar college, without apology.

Little wonder, then, that the advocates of general education have often been their own worst enemy. With their imprecise definitions and ill-defined outcomes, the proponents have come across as soft-headed idealists, and the community college has always detoured around soft-headed idealists. General education has perhaps been too "general," or it has been defined in terms of what it is not (for example, it is not liberal

education). For the notion of general education to strike a chord with community college leaders, it must be described in more pragmatic ways. General education is practical, but somehow it never comes out that way.

Impediments in Organization and Delivery

The intrinsic conflicts are difficult to confront in any systematic fashion. But the barriers present in the organization and delivery of general education in the community colleges are universal and more tangible.

Organization by Discipline. It is the rare community college that does not organize its faculty and its curriculum by traditional academic disciplines. Commitment to the discipline is unlikely to be dissipated significantly in such a setting, and such academic allegiances, rightly or wrongly, create barriers to the integrating notions of general education. Cluster organization and interdisciplinary curriculum certainly do not provide the only response to the general education question, but at least they circumvent the territorial barriers of the academic disciplines. If the structure is to remain the same, then general education leaders must go to extraordinary lengths to weave organization fabrics that support general education. An example is the Skills for Living Program at Dallas Community College.

Failure to Program. Related to discipline organization is the failure of community colleges to plan, support, or evaluate their general education programs. In fact, most community colleges do not have anything that could properly be called a general education "program." When no one is in charge and no one has a vested interest, a monumental effort is required to design, offer, and evaluate such a program. The signal success of career education programs is in no small way related to the comprehensive way in which they have been developed. Certainly, the career education movement has been propelled by federal and state dollars, but it has also been characterized by careful design and evaluation related to the achievement of program goals. Even if the overall organization of the community college does not change, the nonchalant attitude toward programming for general education must.

Curriculum. The community college curriculum, forged from industry-required occupational courses and university-accepted academic transfer courses, and tempered by the 1960s' demands for student relevance, has been essentially closed to an intrusion of general education. The rise of vocationalism requires little elaboration. Perhaps the most pervasive value of American society is that human beings are not

human beings unless they work and earn their way. This value undergirds the development and well-supported program of vocational education in the nation's community colleges. Current student attitudes reflect the acceptance of this value as thousands rush, not to seek higher learning, but to attain job skills.

Vocationalism in itself is not an obstacle to general education, but the argument that all curriculum time must be devoted to vocational preparation for today's highly specalized jobs certainly is. There simply is not an opportunity for general education in the crowded curriculum of today's occupational student.

Not as often articulated is the point of view of many vocational educators who speak with disdain about the value of general education concepts: "Well, do you think a person ought to be able to listen to an opera or make a living?" Such views make further discussion hopeless.

The transferable portion of the community college curriculum has often been designed with the sole criterion of transfer in mind. Such an approach results in a course-by-course patchwork that gives a passing nod, at best, to the integrating themes of general education. The associate's degree is seen only as a step toward the bachelor's, not as the culmination of any activity that can and should have meaning it itself.

A final curriculum barrier to community college general education is the remnant of the "relevant curriculum" of the 1960s. As the students voiced it, education was meaningful only if they decided what it should be and only if it had some immediate and apparent personal appeal to them. The curriculum that students chalked on the walls or lobbied for in corridors has long outlived its "relevance" in many instances. But the creative and intriguing curriculum variations of the 1960s dealt a near-fatal blow to the carefully conceived general education core curricula of the 1950s. General education has never made a complete recovery from the devastation.

Identification with Personal Development. The personal development course is the bellwether of the general education movement. Many colleges in the 1950s and early 1960s included courses such as "Life Adjustment," "Orientation," or simply "Personal Development," which were often required for entering students. Although well intended and often well conceived, they were frequently failures in practice. Few staff members were trained in human development, humanistic psychology, or group process. Thus, the courses often deteriorated into sophomoric attempts to teach students how to study or how to use the college resources. Efforts to encourage students to explore values or to make personal choices were often met with great ridicule because the lack of instructor competence resulted in shallow exercises. The courses

were regarded as "easy A's" that lacked both substance and integrity. The advent of scientific education, which accompanied the launching of Sputnik, squashed the growth of the personal development movement, although it re-emerged as human development education in the late 1960s.

Unfortunately, the disdain for personal development education has transferred itself, by association, to general education. The basic suspicion that general education courses are academically soft is a barrier that has its roots in this old association. The relationship with human development education is a legitimate one, but some new and successful models must be developed if such courses are to be credible and respected.

Alliance with a Methodology. Another alliance that has become a hindrance for general education is that with process or methodology. A number of early leaders in general education said that it had more to do with a way of teaching than with course content. Viewing general education as a new way of teaching shows the difficulty of defining what it is. If it is a new way of teaching—for example, bending the subject matter to the student, rather than the student to the subject matter—then it will be difficult to design general education programs that will garner the support of those faculty members who do not favor this methodological approach.

Proponents of general education have encouraged contract grading, discussion groups, role playing, individualized study, self-grading and reporting, and wiping out the F grade. General education thus appears for many to be "progressive education" in a new disguise. Other curricular "movements," such as liberal education or career education, are not aligned with any particular methodology or approach to instruction and thus are spared the jousts with those who may support the concept but dislike the recommended methods.

Failure to Design Innovative Programs. Despite their well-deserved reputation for innovation, community colleges generally have been unsuccessful in designing programs of general education different from those of the senior institution. This failure presents at least two obstacles: It shows evidence of the failure to rethink general education for the community college context, and it lends credence to the criticisms of general education as elitist university bunk.

Certainly, there are notable exceptions in this widespread failure to design programs of general education especially for community college students, but even where community colleges have made concentrated efforts to design programs for their students, they have frequently been unable to move beyond the tried-and-true university models. The

university models were, by and large, designed for homogeneous populations of resident students, and these models do not lend themselves easily to the heterogeneity of the community college.

Staff as Obstacles

The caring, creative staff of community colleges will be the key to success for general education. But staff members also present a variety of barriers to the general education movement.

Threat of Change. For most community colleges, the development of a bona fide general education program, organized around general education goals, would represent a radical departure from the traditional list of courses, which are required for reasons that may have been long forgotten. Any major change will meet with resistance in an organization, and few changes will meet with greater resistance in a college than changes to the curriculum.

In times of tightening resources, faculty are understandably skittish when course requirements are altered. The threat of shifting enrollments and the accompanying effect on job security is never forgotten during the lofty debates over general education. Some colleges have coped successfully with such fears by promising that no faculty member will lose his or her position as a result of changes to the general education curriculum, but not all institutions can hold out such promises. It is not only difficult but, perhaps, antithetical to basic human drives to put the greater educational good above the need for a regular paycheck.

Need for Staff Development. When faculty and staff are not openly resistant to general education programs, they may be indifferent, at best, or totally uninformed and unprepared, at worst. Yet seldom do well-designed staff development programs accompany new or revised general education plans. Thus, even well-conceived general education programs can fail quickly when faculty members are unable to teach them successfully. The problem here is clearly related to the resources of time and money. Few institutions are willing to devote the hours and dollars that it takes to ready faculty and other staff to conduct a general education program when it is assumed that "anyone" or "everyone" can handle general education.

Lack of Faculty Leadership. Faculty, preoccupied with career programs, their own disciplines, problems of remediation, or securing their positions, have exerted little leadership in the revitalization of general education. In some instances, administrators have usurped the faculty curriculum prerogative. In any case, general education in the com-

munity college has frequently found itself a cause without a champion. The challenge of inviting faculty to think about the educational issues related to general education and to design programs to address these issues is a major one for community colleges.

Lack of Administrative Support. Administrative support and educational leadership, essential to the success of general education, have been in short supply as management-oriented leaders have been preoccupied with enrollments, facilities, budgets, and political pressures. Many community college presidents today are selected for their managerial, rather than their educational, abilities. Such leaders, while necessary and effective in the settings in which they find themselves, are poorly prepared in terms of attitude or education to provide guidance for the general education movement. Yet such guidance and support is critical. In those few community colleges that have developed substantive general education, the president has been a central supporting leader. The lack of such support is a major obstacle to general education.

Students as Obstacles

It is perhaps ironic that the very students whom general education is meant to serve can also be seen as obstacles to it. But to ignore the barriers to general education presented by the characteristics and attitudes of community college students is to ignore also those traits that successful general education programs must be designed to accommodate.

Heterogeneity. The very heterogeneity of the student population upon which the community college prides itself presents serious problems in the development of general education or "common learning." General education is predicated upon the basic assumption that certain learning should be common to all people; it focuses upon the connectedness of things. But when the student population varies in age, preparation, ability, experience, and interest to the extent that the community college population varies, it is difficult to discern a common point of departure, much less to establish the learning that should be common to all students. Once the task of identifying the common ground is accomplished, however, one is still faced with the problem of how to reach it.

Attendance and Motivation. If one were to consider attendance patterns alone, one would face a considerable barrier to general education in the community college. The students are increasingly part-time, on campus only for one or two courses taken in a frequently random se-

quence. They drop in for one semester and stop out for two. They attend in the evening and may complete their community college degrees without ever encountering a full-time instructor.

Their reasons for attendance present yet another obstacle. They are enrolled for a few courses to upgrade their job skills. They want to attain entry-level occupational skills as quickly as possible (read that to mean "without taking all that general education junk"). They just plan to take one or two courses for personal improvement. They intend to satisfy their general education requirements at the university when they transfer.

On top of this barrier, roll out the concertina wire: They could not care less about ever receiving the associate's degree. Either they plan to pursue a bachelor's, so it doesn't matter, or they plan to get a job, so it doesn't matter. The age-old collegiate weapon of "It's required for your degree" simply won't cut it with today's community college students. *You* can require it for *your* degree all you want; it is simply not in their plans.

Wherefore the core? Wherefore required courses? Wherefore general education? The initiation of the Miami-Dade general education program, which is built around a carefully designed core, may provide a partial answer to these questions. Meanwhile, any plan for general education must take factors of student attendance and motivation into careful consideration.

Failure to Include Basic Skills. Although community college students often lack the basic skills in reading, writing, and computation, most general education programs have failed to integrate or even address the issue of basic skills training. Even if all the resources were present, even if faculty and administration strongly supported general education, even if the effects of philosophical impact could be negated, the basic skills problem would remain. How should basic skills be incorporated into general education? Or should they be at all? How can students benefit from the values of a general education program when they cannot read or write? Colleges have designed remedial and developmental programs to cope with the basic skills problems, but these programs are seldom integrated with or even connected to a program of general education.

Attitudes. Student attitudes, including resistance to curriculum prescriptions and an overweening vocationalism, are not supportive of general education programs. Students tend to see many general education programs as denying them their inalienable rights to select the content and sequence of their educational programs. They believe that their vocational goals will not be achieved if they have to take required courses that do not appear to relate to their immediate needs. The resis-

tance to general education requirements is so widespread and so fundamental that we have come to see it as natural and to be expected. It is an attitudinal barrier comparable to that of faculty resistance to curriculum change.

External and Societal Restraints

American society includes forces that drive us toward general education and equally powerful forces that inhibit its growth in the nation's educational institutions. The restraining forces are many; a few of the most potent ones are examined here.

Specialization. America has become a nation of specialists, partly at the behest of the educational system, which now decries the lack of support for general education. The nation has thrived, in part, because of its emphasis in the professions on specialization. When not only institutional policies and procedures but also the entire society are designed to encourage specialization, how can general education fit into the plans?

The "Me Generation" and the "Moral Majority." The advent of the "me generation" has gnawed at the very foundation of general education: that is, the idea that there are common links that bind humanity. And it has eroded the fundamental principle upon which general education is based: that a common core of social values exists. When an entire generation devotes itself to narcissistic self-indulgence, how can the value of a general education be translated? If, as some behavioral scientists avow, there is no longer a core of values in American society, what will be the basis of general education, which has heretofore been in great part designed upon such a core?

The opposite face of the "me generation" is found in the "new right," equally a societal obstacle to general education in its prescriptive moralism and rigid doctrines. If the narrowly defined values of the new right are confused with the common core of values espoused by general education, then general education may be associated with the same sort of intellectual dwarfism that has characterized this movement. A more blatant obstacle to general education is apparent in the opposition of the new right to the liberating, humanistic philosophies that have long undergirded the general education movement.

Focus on Survival. The emergence of the "me generation" is related to the social emphasis on survival in recent years. A declining economy, rising crime, and dwindling natural resources have focused educational and public attention on survival strategies, not on areas perceived as esoteric. General education, unfortunately, has too often been

viewed as nonessential and esoteric, several steps up the hierarchy from survival. Proponents argue loudly, but not too effectively, that general education values are more important than ever when we must cooperate in order to survive. General education could shine in this arena, but the connections must be presented more effectively to students and to community constituents.

External Control of Curriculum. Community colleges have been particularly susceptible to control of their general education curricula by external agencies such as senior colleges, occupational advisory boards, and state agencies. Even though the majority of community college students do not transfer to the universities, community colleges still respond to university control on courses to be transferred. In some states, university requirements actually dictate the basic general education core for a community college.

Some hope for improvement is held out by models such as the General Education Compact for the State of Florida, which ensures that a community college may develop its own general education program, print it in its catalogue, and be assured of its acceptance for transfer to any state university in Florida. Unfortunately, most community colleges continue to line up with the traditional requirements of the university.

Occupational advisory boards shape the curriculum most frequently by squeezing out general education courses to permit more vocational credits. State agencies, governing boards, and legislatures have also created barricades to general education in some cases. For example, Texas requires two courses in American history and two courses in government. This requirement leaves little room for imagination in the development of the social science dimension of a general education curriculum. With all of the internal problems that general education must face, the intrusions of external barriers add insult to injury.

Overcoming Obstacles

The sad thing about this chapter is that it is so easy to write. No assignment could be easier than ticking off the obstacles to general education. Far more difficult is the task of overcoming these obstacles. There are no easy solutions and no panaceas. Some of the barriers are fundamental; they simply form the parameters within which general education must function. The recent revival of interest in general education in the community college is clear evidence that the obstacles can be overcome and that the goal is worthy of the effort that is required. There are many avenues available to those committed to the revitalization of general education. A few of the more obvious ones are set out here.

Review of Goals and Methods. The goals and the delivery of general education programs are worthy of major review to assure that they are adapted to new times and a changed student population. The general education of today does not have to be synonymous with the general education of yesterday. Indeed, one of the definitions of general education is that it is the common learning for the common man in his or her time and place. We are in a different time and place than the 1950s, and the goals of general education should reflect that difference.

Even recently developed general education programs show little sensitivity to the characteristics of community college students. For example, most groups planning general education programs proclaim loudly that the program does not have to be limited to a core of courses. However, the result is invariably a core of courses—usually a predictable cluster of five or six requirements. This traditional model is perhaps unnecessarily limiting. If general education is conceived as a core of outcomes or experiences, rather than as a core of courses, then this core could be achieved through a variety of means more appropriate for the community college students of the 1980s. We have not even begun to tap the resources of instructional design and technology in the creative solution of general education programs. Individual assessment, cable television, learning units—all have possibilities in the delivery of meaningful general education.

Staff Development. Extensive, long-term, well-planned staff development can be an important contributing factor to the success of general education. Indeed, a report on the general education model at Los Medanos College goes so far as to say that "this project has demonstrated beyond question that the most important determinant of success in curriculum innovation is professional staff development" (Carhart, 1980, p. 8). Many of the obstacles outlined here can be addressed through a sound staff development program. In fact, when such staff development sessions are organized around general education issues, faculty members may find themselves, for the first time since graduate school (or perhaps for the first time ever) grappling with questions of educational philosophy and priority. Such a setting is stimulating and can revive not only general education but also the waning spirits of many a "burned out" faculty member.

Design of Alternate Programs. Because of the student diversity and the attendance patterns of the community college, general education programs for specific groups of students may need to be identified. While such a notion may seem antithetical to "common learning," it is predicated on the pragmatic view that some general education is better than no general education.

If it is impossible to develop an institution-wide program for all

students, it may still be possible to develop general education programs for selected groups. Nursing students might follow a program with certain emphases, while business students and transfer students might follow other patterns. These alternatives could address common goals, but in ways tailored to the needs of the particular student groups. Such an approach has the added benefits of attracting greater faculty interest and of demonstrating the relevance of general education to students enrolled in the program.

Noncurricular Dimensions. Most discussion of general education is limited to the curriculum. However, there are many opportunities for general education that lie beyond the curriculum. Noncredit or community service programs could provide creative routes to the attainment of general education goals. Student development programs, wellness programs to prevent stress and disease, and other student services are tailor-made to meet many of the goals of general education. But it will take some imagination and ingenuity to make the connections to these noncurricular dimensions of the educational program.

One appealing possibility is the notion of a general education program for adults. General education is usually conceived as a program for the young or inexperienced. And yet, if it has a basic value and integrity, then all adults, even older adults, can probably see the value of general education in their lives.

The fifty-five-year-old business executive understands full well that she has missed out on the humanities. The thirty-seven-year-old salesman knows that he needs to sharpen his communication skills. The forty-five-year-old returning housewife is excited about the human development course that will allow her to explore various careers and value choices. Once adults have achieved their basic Maslovian needs, a college might advertise bluntly: "Do you feel the gaps in your education? Even though you have a college degree, do you feel educated? Are there courses you wish you had taken? Opportunities you wish you hadn't missed? Then come to your local community college to fill in the gaps, or just to stop and catch up. It's never too late to be an educated person."

Such a special program would necessarily explore noncurricular, as well as curricular, means for its achievement. But this kind of program would be designed for the times in which we live and for the particular kinds of people that we serve.

Need for Systematic Planning. If general education is ever to succeed in the community college, the same kind of programmatic planning, support, and evaluation that have characterized career and developmental programs must be committed to general education. A point of departure for such planning will be the identification of elements of gen-

eral education that are in particular harmony with the community college philosophy and purpose. A fundamental adherence to democratic principles undergirds both movements, but this commonality is seldom explored. General education is a great equalizer and, as such, should have special appeal for "democracy's college." The spectre of elitism can be cast out by the recognition and articulation of such common principles.

Beyond this important step, however, colleges must commit the human and financial resources to general education that have been devoted without question to other dimensions of the curriculum. Responsibility for the success of the general education program must be fixed and must be shared by faculty and administration. Programs that are systematically designed must be systematically evaluated. And the experiences or courses in such programs must be the best that they can be, not the dregs of the institution, taught by junior instructors to jumbo classes of yawning students. All too often, general education cannot be described appropriately as a program at all. It is often merely a list of courses required by the nearest university, placed mindlessly, heedlessly, into the catalog. No wonder that it has been difficult to take it seriously.

Conclusions

General education is the best idea that ever came down the pike for community colleges. Critics would claim that it's the best idea that will never work. The obstacles outlined here will certainly make the weak of heart agree, for the obstacles are many and are pervasive. Some institutions will never develop a general education program worth its salt; most will not even try. But for those few brave, hardy, and healthy institutions that will make the attempt in this decade, we offer applause and encouragement. The community college of the future will survive without general education programs—but with them can come a liveliness, a coherence, an integrity, and an identity that marks the difference between survival and success.

References

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Terry O'Banion is vice chancellor of educational affairs for the Dallas County Community College District.

Ruth G. Shaw is associate vice-chancellor of educational affairs for the Dallas County Community College District.