

A Personal Salute to General Education

Terry O'Banion describes how his career and life have benefited from a strong emphasis on general education.

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The Great Depression lasted a very long time for my family. My mother often reminded us that our goal was to aspire to poverty because we were born in abject poverty.

Horatio Alger was a real person, a graduate of Harvard University who wrote 140 books in the 1800s about struggling boys from lower-economic backgrounds who went from “rags to riches” with the help of a special benefactor who gave them a start in life. Friends have often suggested that my life story is a perfect example of the Horatio Alger story, and it does reflect some of its components—I was born poor yet was ambitious, worked hard and then achieved considerable success, supported by a benefactor. But my benefactor was not a rich person. It was general education.

I was born in a log cabin without the aid of a doctor or a midwife in LaBelle, Fla., a small rural town of about 1,000 people—except we lived three miles out in the country on an unpaved road. We did not have running water, electricity or an indoor toilet. The cabin had three rooms: my parents’ tiny bedroom, a kitchen with a wood stove and a room where my mother ironed clothes for townsfolk in the evening and where we ate and I slept in one bed with my three sisters. During the day, my mother walked to town and back, where she was the cook at Flora and Ella’s restaurant. My father excavated Seminole Indian graves and caught and sold poisonous snakes.

My mother graduated from LaBelle High School, as did I and my three sisters and almost all of my 18 first cousins. The teachers were wonderful and deeply committed to persevering students. I have fond memories of almost all of my teachers, some of whom took me under their wing. Those who saw promise in me encouraged me to think about college—a totally foreign concept to me and my family. However, I won a \$400 scholarship from the Elks Club, and with the \$100 my cosmetician sister gave me from her tips and my working during the summers, I was able to consider college.

Unfortunately, in spite of the personal encouragement from several teachers and my principal, the education I was receiving in high school fell far short in preparing me for college. Only 15 students were in my high school graduating class, and the curriculum was very limited. Ninth-grade algebra was the highest math we could take, and 10th-grade biology was the highest science. No languages were offered. I did get credit for English, history, physical education, a course in agriculture and working in the library for one period.

Meeting General Education

Little did I know when my principal drove me 200 miles north to Gainesville, Fla., and got me a job busing tables in the University of Florida cafeteria, how much my life was about to change. I had no idea what college would be like because no member of my family had ever attended one. For some reason, I had created in my imagination the image that to go to college I would be required to own a tuxedo—a garment I'd never seen except in magazines. I persisted in this dream until my high school principal gave me his old tuxedo and my mother sacrificed to buy me a pair of black patent leather shoes. Decades later, I donated the outfit, which I had never worn, to Goodwill. I was totally unprepared for college.

Fortunately, I did not have to make any decisions about courses, as students do today, selecting 12 or so courses from lists of 200 courses or more. I had no background to select courses since, in high school, they had all been selected for me. The University of Florida required all students to take 12 comprehensive courses, or C-Courses, as they were known.

Years later I learned that these courses were carefully designed as an integrated common core of learning known as general education. These introductory and comprehensive courses changed my life substantially. I still remember each of them vividly.

C11 and 12, American Institutions. They gave me a world's-eye view of the major organizations that created the foundation for our democracy. The courses, while primarily lectures to 300 or more students, were taught by the university's senior professors, who were not only brilliant and stimulating but had also written the texts for them. I will never forget one early session in which the professor chewed out a student who came in late for the lecture and was subsequently booed by the students. He then lectured for one hour so eloquently that he received a standing ovation.

C21 and C22, Science and Geology. We could choose between geology and astronomy, and I chose geology, which helped create in me an avocational interest

in fossils and the formation of the earth that has continued throughout the rest of my life.

C31 and C32, Communication. These were tandem courses in written and oral communication that motivated me to major in English and speech. Required extra readings opened me to a world of literature that I didn't know existed in high school. I completed a B.A. in English and discovered an ability to write through the many writing laboratories the university offered.

C41 and 42, Logic and Fundamental Mathematics. They did not always add to my general knowledge, but their introduction did help me understand that I would never master nor have any interest in certain areas of knowledge. Learning that I could survive without understanding algebra was a particular breakthrough moment.

C51 and C52, Humanities. These two tandem courses provided the most substantial educational experience I've ever had. Although I had been a closeted reader of books in high school, I had never listened to music except on the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday night when we gathered around my grandfather's battery-operated Philco radio. I had never understood a painting except the two in my grandmother's dining room: one of Franklin Roosevelt and the other of Jesus Christ holding a bleeding heart. I had never read or seen a play except *You Can't Take It with You* performed by my senior class. And "philosophy" was a word I'd never heard of.

Since that introduction, I have grown immensely in understanding and thriving in the arts and the humanities. My car radio is forever attuned to KUSC, the classical radio station at the University of Southern California, to which I donate. I have visited many of the world's best-known museums and art galleries. And I have created a very specific philosophy of life, reflecting the work of Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party," in which one of her characters indicates, "Life is; isn't it!"

C61 and C62, Biology and Evolution. I have always loved biology, and C61 provided a thorough review of it. However, the second course on evolution flummoxed me. My parents and grandparents were not religious, but I was fairly

fundamental in that regard during my high school years. I did not believe in evolution and struggled with how to make sense of this heresy. This was a very painful period of growth that brought much agony and many tears. I almost dropped out of college over my confusion about evolution, even though I was an A student.

I somehow survived the crisis in belief and began to explore organized religion with a small group of friends who attended a different church each week. We then conducted our own seminar in our residence hall to critique the religion. These explorations were instrumental in helping me understand the failures of religion and the great damage religion has done around the world for many centuries.

The impact of those courses has substantially directed and enriched my life to this day. After graduating with honors from the University of Florida, I taught high school for several years, became a dean of students at Central Florida Junior College and earned my master's degree in counseling psychology. I also completed a Ph.D. in higher education administration in 1966 as a Kellogg Fellow at Florida State University.

But it was my work, beginning in 1964, with Joseph Fordyce, the president at Central Florida Junior College while I was dean, in creating Santa Fe College in Gainesville that began my next major chapter in general education. Fordyce and I had shared a deep commitment to humanistic education, the foundation on which we would establish Santa Fe. We had an entire year without faculty, staff or students to create Santa Fe, and a new kind of general education was to be the heart of the institution.

Santa Fe opened its doors to students in 1966 with an integrated general education program requiring every entering student to take six three-credit-hour courses, for a total of 18 credit hours. The most fundamental course, *The Individual in a Changing Environment*, was a personal development course designed to help each student explore their values and philosophy of life, as well as confront prejudices and viewpoints. It focused on personal elements not often addressed in college courses today.

Beyond that core course were courses in three other areas that impact individual development: the humanities, physical science and the social sciences. Students also had to be competent in two languages: English and mathematics. And the learning strategies the college employed in all these courses included an emphasis on active learning, problem-based learning and collaborative learning.

Santa Fe also developed a philosophy of values and a philosophy of teaching to give meaning to those core courses. The Santa Fe Commitment included eight statements:

1. The student is the central focus for the process of learning.
2. Teaching occurs only when students learn.
3. Effective educational experiences will modify human behavior in a positive manner.
4. All human beings are motivated to achieve what they believe is good.
5. Education should be an exciting, creative and rewarding experience for the student and the teacher.
6. All human beings have worth, dignity and potential.
7. Experimentation and innovation are reflections of attitudes; when they are translated into practice, the process of education can be significantly advanced.
8. Traditional concepts of education (the lecture, the 50-minute period, the standard textbook and so forth) are suspect and in need of careful trial and evaluation at least equal to, and perhaps more than, new and innovative practices.

In addition, the Santa Fe Commitment was used to screen every new employee. Every applicant for a position at the college had to write a response to the statements indicating the extent to which each reflected their own values. Applicants were also asked to provide evidence from their experience of how they had implemented each statement as an instructor or administrator. In short,

besides creating an integrated core of learning, Santa Fe embedded in that core in a culture of innovation and a philosophy of student-centered learning that made it transformative for students and for the faculty and administration. In 1968, it was selected as one of only 12 colleges in the United States for charter membership in the League for Innovation in the Community College, based in great part on its general education program, and it has continued to win accolades. It won the 2015 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the nation's pre-eminent recognition of high achievement and performance in community colleges.

A Continuing Advocate

After completing the design of Santa Fe College, I began a prolific writing career as a professor of higher education and longtime leader of the League for Innovation in the Community College. And over the years, general education has been one of the most important topics I've written about. For example, in 1982, my colleague Ruth Shaw, former president of Central Piedmont Community College in North Carolina, and I wrote a chapter, "Obstacles to General Education," in B. Lamar Johnson's *New Directions in Community Colleges* that has been accessed by hundreds of educators from dozens of countries and is still being accessed today.

Numerous other articles have followed in the years since. In 2014, I wrote "Defending Liberal Education: The Essential Questions," followed by 15 more articles on that topic through 2022, but my best work during this period was a monograph, *Bread and Roses: Helping Students Make a Good Living and Live a Good Life*. In it, I proposed an essential education for all students that would bridge the historical divide between general and liberal education and career and technical education.

During 2021 and 2022, I also worked with my colleague Cindy Miles, chancellor emerita of Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community District in California, on a national study of general education in the nation's community colleges—the first on this topic in 20 years. As part of that study, we reviewed general education philosophy statements, requirements and approved course offerings from the most recent physical and web-based catalogs of a sample of 30 community colleges.

We found strong agreement of the subject-matter categories colleges used to organize their general education courses: arts and humanities, social and behavioral sciences, natural sciences, communication and composition, and mathematics. We also 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, such as breadth and depth, foundational, integrated, cross-disciplinary, and so on.

We were heartened by the focus of those statements by both colleges and accrediting associations. Anyone reading them would be impressed by the quality of education community college students were receiving. Students graduating from a cohesive and integrated program based on these philosophical statements would be so well prepared to make a good living and live a good life that a community college education in America would be the envy of the world.

But, unfortunately, that is not, in fact, the case in today's community college world. The state of general education in today's community college is dismal and disheartening. There does not appear to be any kind of organized and supported reform of general education except in a handful of outlier progressive institutions. Community colleges have apparently succumbed to an observation made by President Woodrow Wilson: "It is easier to move a cemetery than to change the curriculum."

As someone whose career and life have benefited so much from a strong emphasis on general education, however, I will continue to advocate for and speak out about the value of such courses. I will encourage other higher education leaders to do so, as well. Community colleges must offer integrated curricula that provide students the kind of education they need to meet the challenges they are now confronting and will face in the future. They must have the capacity to serve as the true benefactors they should be to the Horatio Algiers of today and tomorrow. And they must continue to be able to transform the lives of struggling young people for the better—just as they once so transformed the life of a boy born in abject poverty in Florida.

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