

The Philosophy and Practice of General Education in Community Colleges in the United States

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**Terry O'Banion is Senior Professor of Practice, Kansas State University, and
President Emeritus, League for Innovation in the Community College.**

**Cindy L. Miles is Professor of Practice, Kansas State University; Chancellor
Emerita, Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District; and Executive
Director, Global Community College Leadership Network.**

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Terry O'Banion & Cindy Miles

Abstract

This national study reviewed General Education (GE) philosophy statements, requirements, and approved GE course offerings from a random, stratified sample of 30 U.S. public two-year, associate degree granting colleges (excluding specialized institutions), identified by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. Key findings include the following:

1. Mandatory GE programs are universal in community colleges across the U. S.
2. Most colleges made it clear that their intention for GE is to offer a common core of knowledge and skills needed by *all* students, regardless of major, to succeed in higher education and life.
3. We found little evidence that the ideals described for GE programs translated to cohesive, integrated bodies of knowledge.
4. Most colleges required students to choose 12 courses from long lists of approved courses structured only by discipline area.
5. Most striking was the array of GE options colleges approved—as high as 491 and averaging 162—to meet the dozen required GE courses.
6. GE offerings varied somewhat by institutional size but more so by governance structure, as colleges in states with strong centralized governance systems offered far fewer GE options.

The surfeit of disconnected GE course offerings found in this study mirrors research on the negative effects of high-choice, low-structure curricular models (Bailey et al., 2015; Scott-

Clayton, 2011), particularly for disadvantaged or first-generation students. Reforming GE programs to provide a true common core of essential learning could reduce the stress of too many choices and better prepare students for the 21st Century.

General Education in the Community College: A National Study

Community colleges (sometimes called junior colleges, technical colleges, and two-year colleges) in the U. S. have been the democratic gateway to higher education, welcoming the mainstream and the marginalized, accommodating the complex lives of its sundry students, and widening the road to economic and social mobility through higher learning for those who might not otherwise have access to higher learning. General education curricula constitute at least half of most associate degrees, providing the foundational core for higher education, as well as promising to prepare students to live well and responsibly in the world before them. Situated on the first rungs of the undergraduate ladder, community college general education must, by necessity, align with that of students' intended transfer institutions, or else it wastes their resources and thwarts their goals. General education 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 on general education programs in community colleges. Our purpose was to gain a current understanding of the status of general education in community colleges in light of the massive reform movements to increase equitable student access and success that have swept the nations' two-year institutions in recent years. We began with a historical review of the evolution of general education and its role in community colleges, and proceeded with two key questions:

(1) What is the current philosophy driving general education in community colleges?

(2) What are general education requirements for degree completion in U.S. community colleges, and how are colleges structuring their offerings for students to meet these requirements?

A Short History of Liberal/General Education

Human beings have a strong proclivity to create categories to organize their understanding and communicate it to others. This organizing tendency holds true in education as one way of answering what should be taught and what students should learn. Educational classification systems have been compiled for thousands of years in the form of disciplines, content areas, subject matter, fields of study, programs, and, more recently, meta-majors. The simplest categorization may be reflected in the 1907 song about young children playing on the school grounds:

School days, school days,
Dear old golden rule days,
Readin' and writin' and 'rithmetic,
Taught to the tune of the hick'ry stick,
You were a Queen in calico,
I was your bashful barefoot beau,
And you wrote on my slate, I love you, Joe,
When we were a couple of kids. (Cobb & Edwards, chorus)

Readin', writin', and 'rithmetic were the general education core of learning as seen through the eyes of elementary school students and teachers.

Among the oldest categorizations of the essential elements of higher learning are the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) that formed the classic seven liberal arts of medieval universities. Half a century later, when Harvard University was established in the English colonies in 1636, it incorporated a strict classic core including rhetoric and logic, ethics and politics, arithmetic, and geometry, and later, algebra, astronomy, physics, metaphysics, and theology (Harvard Library, n.d).

Harvard has remained a touchstone for core curricula, from its founding classic core to its introduction of the *elective system* that led to having only one required course—English composition—by 1900 (Mintz, 2020), to its current cornerstone Program in General Education, requiring intentionally interdisciplinary courses that its website proclaims, “are unusually explicit in connecting the subjects you study to the people you will become.” Early reform of the core curriculum was led by 40-year Harvard President Charles Eliot who championed a radical, utilitarian “new education” beginning in 1869, that eliminated course requirements, expanded applied sciences and humanities, and down-played *dead languages*—all with a dogged eye toward preparing young men (for they were all men at that time) to meet the needs of a changing democratic society (Ali, 2019).

By the middle of the 20th century, Harvard’s President James Conant led an egalitarian reform to attract students based on talent rather than wealth and entitlement. He commissioned a dozen faculty who worked two years to define a core, universal education for schools and colleges aimed at opening pathways to higher learning and advancing American democracy. *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee*, known as *The Harvard Report of 1945*, has been reprinted over a dozen times in the last 75 years and characterized as “one of the most important documents in the history of American education in the 20th century” (Kravitz, 1994, p. 1). It is elegantly written and an essential read for anyone interested in general education because it reviews the overarching questions about democracy and the role of education in promoting “informed responsible life in our society.” Responding to the lessons of World War II, the Harvard Committee contended, “General education is the sole means by which communities can protect themselves from the ill effects of over rapid change” (p. 266). *The Harvard Report of 1945* called for three “divisions of learning”: (1) *humanities*, (2) *social*

sciences, and (3) *natural sciences*, forming the cornerstone of the Harvard College curriculum and setting a benchmark for higher education for decades.

Forty years later, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)—known then as the Association of American Colleges (AAC)—led a new national discussion about the essential higher education core. Their 1985 landmark report *Integrity in the College Curriculum* declared the curriculum to be adrift:

As for what passes as a college curriculum almost anything goes. We have reached a point at which we are more confident about the length of a college education than its content and purpose. . . . The curriculum has given way to a marketplace philosophy: it is a supermarket where students are shoppers and professors are merchants of learning. (p.2)

To counter the dominant “anything goes” curricular approach, AAC recommended nine key components to frame an integrated “whole” curriculum: (1) *inquiry, abstract logical thinking, and critical analysis*; (2) *literacy in writing, reading, speaking, and listening*; (3) *understanding numerical data*; (4) *historical consciousness*; (5) *science*; (6) *values*; (7) *art*; (8) *international and multicultural experiences*; and (9) *study in depth*. (Proctor, 1998, p. 194)

In the community college world, B. Lamar Johnson’s 1952 *General Education in Action: A Report of the California Study of General Education in the Junior College*, articulated a need for eight core areas that all general education (GE) programs should address: (1) *psychology and personal adjustment*; (2) *health, physical education, and recreation*; (3) *family life education*; (4) *communication*; (5) *creative arts and humanities*; (6) *natural sciences and mathematics*; (7) *vocational courses*; and (8) *citizenship and social studies*. These focus areas shifted with the turn of the 21st Century, as noted in a study of 230 U.S. and Canadian two-year institutions that identified six areas “deemed essential for student success in the Knowledge Age that characterizes the new global economy” (Wilson et al., 2000, p.18): (1) *communication*, (2)

critical thinking/problem solving, (3) technology literacy, (4) information management, (5) collaboration/teamwork, and (6) cultural/global studies.

Consideration of such lists of 21st Century essential skills has been relegated to the career education side of most community college houses or occasionally included in stand-alone College Success courses. Curiously, these are central among AAC&U's *Essential Learning Outcomes* framework that extols the value of a broad-based liberal undergraduate education in preparing students for 21-century careers and citizenship—the central aim of general education writ large.

The Current Community College Curricular Reform Movement

In 2015, the community college world was upended by *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey et al.), which distilled decades of data from the Community College Research Center (Teachers College, Columbia University). It zeroed in on the enduringly low and inequitable success rates in two-year colleges and the impotence of what they termed the *cafeteria curriculum*: “an array of often-disconnected courses, programs, and support services that students are expected to navigate mostly on their own” (p.3). This publication crystallized criticism of the abysmal experiences of large numbers of community college students, especially low-income and students of color, and inspired a near-universal *Guided Pathways* movement in two-year colleges sustained by rising state-mandated reforms.

Currently, many community colleges across the U.S. are redesigning their programs of study, attending to “the student experience,” reducing (or eliminating) remedial courses, and showing promise in accelerating student achievement and closing equity gaps. The guided pathways approach calls for colleges to reorganize program offerings into career clusters rather than individual majors and to provide straightforward and highly supported pathways—*program*

maps—to graduation, transfer, and employment. Most institutions establish their own program groupings, with such titles as meta-majors, schools, career clusters, or academic and career pathways. In 2013, the Florida legislature required all 28 institutions in the Florida College System to adopt the following eight meta-majors: (1) Arts, Humanities, Communication and Design; (2) Business; (3) Education; (4) Health Sciences; (5) Industry/Manufacturing and Construction; (6) Public Safety; (7) Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics; and (8) Social and Behavioral Sciences and Human Services. (Florida College Access Network, 2013, para. 2) In most institutions undertaking guided pathway reform, deeply inclusive conversations among faculty, staff, administrators, employers, and students are shaping the structure and direction of the changes underway.

A question left unanswered among these reforms, and the one explored in this study, is to what extent these institutional transformations are manifested in their general education programs, which by convention and regulation remain foundational to community college education. To understand current practices in community college general education, we conducted a national analysis of how two-year colleges describe and implement their general education programs.

Methodology

Our approach for this study was to review general education philosophy statements, requirements, and approved general education course offerings from the most recent catalogs (physical and web-based) of a random sample of 30 community colleges and to examine these data using thematic analysis and descriptive statistics. 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 looked at subgroups of two-year colleges categorized by CCIHE as large/very large (FTE enrollment 5,000 or greater), medium (2,000-4,999 FTE), and small/very small (1,999 or fewer FTE). FTE means full-time equivalent students—a way in the U. S. to categorize students for the purpose of funding.

Table 1 displays data from the *2018 CCIHE Update* noting the relationship between the size of two-year colleges and the share of students across the country each group serves. By size, 14% of U.S. two-year colleges are classified as large or very large, 21% are medium, and 65% are classified as small or very small institutions. These proportions reverse when viewed through the lens of how many students each group enrolled. Although only one in seven institutions across the country are classified as large or very large colleges, they enrolled more than half of all community college students, whereas small/very small colleges enrolled only 15% of the overall student population, despite constituting nearly two-thirds of all two-year colleges. Simply put, large community colleges across the country serve the bulk of students.

Table 1

Comparison of U.S. Two-Year Colleges and Student Enrollments by College Size

Institutions by Size	Proportion of U.S. Two-Year Colleges	Percentage of U.S. Student Enrollment
Large/Very Large	14%	56%
Medium	21%	29%
Small/Very Small	65%	15%

Note. Data are from Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2018).

For our study, we included those classified by Carnegie Classification as large and very large institutions into a single category we called *large*, and we included both the small and very small categories in our *small* category. To balance the number of institutions with their institutional

impact on student populations, we chose a randomly stratified sample of 30 colleges evenly distributed across each of the three categories: 10 large, 10 medium, and 10 small public two-year colleges.

Limitations

We collected most of the information for this study from college catalogs for the 2020-2021 academic year. In a few cases, current catalog data were available in a web-only format that did not offer comparable data for our analysis (e.g., number of pages in college catalogs). For those colleges, we used data from the most recent archived catalog, dating back one or two years. For colleges with general education requirements that varied among degrees, we examined the Associate of Arts (AA) degree. Several colleges did not note specific *general education requirements* and instead simply listed *degree requirements*. In these cases, we examined the degree requirements for areas of study and courses beyond those specified for the major for the AA degree.

Findings

Philosophies of General Education (GE)

Almost two-thirds of the community colleges provided a statement of their philosophy of general education. We found great concurrence in GE ideology across all colleges, regardless of size, as expressed in these purpose statements for preparing students for the generalities of the world of work and the world at large:

GE Philosophy statements from large community colleges

- General education provides a broad-based learning foundation designed to prepare students for personal, communal, and global responsibility. It provides students with the skills and self-awareness to navigate and fully participate in a

rapidly changing world with resilience and perseverance. With this foundation, students are equipped to pursue lifelong inquiry for the purpose of constructing a fulfilling and purposeful life.

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

GE Philosophy statements from medium-sized community colleges

- 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.
- The purpose of our General Studies program is to provide a solid, cross-disciplinary foundation in both knowledge and skills to prepare students to be more well-rounded individuals as they navigate their communities and the society around them.

GE Philosophy statements from small community colleges

- 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.
- General education courses prepare students to understand and deal constructively with the diversity of the contemporary world. Students are exposed to ideas and knowledge leading to an expanded capacity for cultural and global awareness and sensitivity.

Among the philosophy statements, most colleges made clear their intention to offer a common core of knowledge and skills needed by all students with such statements as *skills that*

are deemed to be commonly shared, must possess in common, common body of knowledge, and general education will be common to all students regardless of major. A few institutions mentioned ties between their GE programs and their institutional learning outcomes—and offered a list of notable goals for student learning—but only one explained how that connection translated to the course students were asked to choose. Overall, we found little evidence that these philosophical ideals were translated to intentionally cohesive, integrated bodies of knowledge beyond broad lists of GE approved courses from across the catalog or guidelines to “select any two courses from the following disciplines: Anthropology, Economics, Geography, History, Political Science, Psychology, Social Science, Sociology.”

However, following such inspiring statements of purpose, were astoundingly convoluted explanations of GE expectations, 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.

Several colleges devoted 5 to 13 pages in their respective catalogs to outlining byzantine options for multiple sets of general education requirements students should complete, depending on their targeted transfer institutions. No doubt, such contract-like language is aimed at guiding students

to make good decisions and avoid loss of credit upon transfer. Colleges seemed to know that this 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 complex GE programs is how few community colleges have sufficient advisors/counselors to provide the individual attention students need to help them wade through these murky waters during critical registration times.

Accrediting Commissions and General Education

There are seven regional accrediting commissions in the U. S. in which member colleges and universities seek peer-reviewed accreditation for meeting standards. Colleges often made clear the connections between their general education programs and accreditation requirements. We found frequent references to accreditation obligations in general education 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 non-prescriptive, 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 life-long learning.

All seven regional accreditors specify the need for a general education program (or a defined and measured set of core competencies) for undergraduate programs. Most note minimal course credits (15-20 for the associate degree) but also have expanded their guidelines to allow for alternatives to coursework for demonstration of general education competencies. For example, HLC’s policy calls for meeting its general education 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 general education 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 (critical analysis and reasoning/logical thinking), human/cultural diversity, and information literacy. All call for 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).

General Education Subject Matter Categories

We found great variation in how colleges named and grouped their subject area requirements and an assortment of GE typologies. Most colleges referred to disciplinary titles, but a few referred to lofty, overarching learning outcomes (e.g., *skills and self-awareness to navigate and fully participate in a rapidly changing world with resilience and perseverance*). Nearly half referenced detailed state mandated GE/core requirements or university GE transfer agreements.

Deconstructing the GE categories and their associated approved courses was the biggest hurdle to making comparisons across colleges. To create a structure for comparative analysis, we examined college GE groupings for patterns and applied theoretical templates from the literature and accrediting commission as guides. Ultimately, most college GE requirements fell into five overarching categories with varying names, but the most common were: (1) Arts and Humanities, (2) Social and Behavioral Sciences, (3) Natural Sciences, (4) Communication and Composition, and (5) Mathematics.

The universally required GE competency area—which we ultimately labelled *Communication and Composition*—was variously called *Communication*, *Communications*, *Writing*, *Composition*, *Fundamentals of Composition*, *Written Communications*, *Writing and Rhetoric*, *Written and Oral Communication*, *Communication Skills*, *Composition and Rhetoric*, *English Communication*, *English Composition*, *English Composition/Writing*, and *English/Communications*. In several colleges, this category also included subtopics of *Critical Thinking*, (e.g., *English Language Communication*, *Critical Thinking*, *Language and Rationality*, *Analytical Thinking*).

The *Arts and Humanities* category was sometimes named *Fine Arts and Humanities* or *Humanities/Fine Arts*. A few colleges called it simply *Humanities* but included arts courses in

this group. Other variations included *Arts and Letters*; *Humanities, Arts, and Design*; and *Humanities, Literature, and Fine Arts*. About a third had separate categories for humanities and arts courses with specified requirements for each (e.g., one large southern college called for a course in *Creative Arts* and one in *Language, Philosophy, & Culture*). Overall, most used the title *Arts and Humanities*, or vice versa.

The area of *Social and Behavioral Sciences* was more consistently titled, with most using this specific nomenclature. Seven institutions referred to this category simply as *Social Science* or *Social Sciences* but included behavioral science courses. Many colleges also included courses in economics, history, political science, and government among options for this category, but nine colleges set aside *History* or *History/Government* as a separate category with its own set of requirements.

Natural Sciences was the most common designation for science requirements. Other variations in this grouping were *Natural and Physical Sciences*, *Life and Physical Sciences* (or vice versa), *Scientific Ways of Knowing*, and simply *Science*.

Mathematics was the most consistently named category, with 25 of the 30 colleges using this title or the condensed *Math*. This GE group was otherwise titled *Mathematical Ways of Knowing*, *Mathematics/Quantitative Reasoning*, *Quantitative Literacy*, or *Quantitative Reasoning*. Three colleges listed *Natural Sciences and Mathematics* as a single GE category but outlined specific math requirements within it.

A few colleges had GE categories other than these five major groupings. We clustered these following the patterns of where most colleges placed the same or similarly named courses. With much digging through course listings and descriptions, we found most colleges followed the same implicit GE subject area structure. Beyond similarities in GE topical classifications,

however, we found major divergence in the number and array of courses that colleges made available to meet GE subject area requirements.

General Education Course Requirements and Options

Despite claims that GE programs provide a common core of learning for all students, the assortment of courses from which students must choose to obtain this foundational knowledge suggested otherwise. 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. Table 2 lists the number of GE courses required in each of the large, medium, and small colleges in the study. It also shines a light on the astonishing sum of courses approved to meet those GE requirements. Bear in mind, these are specifically approved courses (not electives) that colleges required students to sort through so as to choose a handful to fulfill requirements for an associate degree and meet the ideals of being educated members of society.

Table 2

Numbers of Required and Approved General Education Courses at Large, Medium, and Small U.S. Community Colleges

Required # GE Courses from # of GE Course Options		
Large Colleges	Medium Colleges	Small Colleges
11 from 231	14 from 163	12 from 96
13 from 166	15 from 126	11 from 223
10 from 491	14 from 68	12 from 129
10 from 201	9 from 213	11 from 89
14 from 162	12 from 165	16 from 90
13 from 71	9 from 372	10 from 77
15 from 152	10 from 370	11 from 56
13 from 147	11 from 223	11 from 96
13 from 49	15 from 102	14 from 105
12 from 138	11 from 228	11 from 58

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

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

The 30 colleges examined in the study mandated a steady average of 12 GE courses (sometimes expressed in terms of credit hours or units) for degree completion. Requirements ranged from a low of 9 to 16 GE courses, but most institutions called for 10 to 13.

The major differences we found among college GE programs were in the number of GE courses from which students had to select to meet the 12 requirements. Overall, colleges approved 162 GE courses, but college GE course offerings ranged from 49 to 491. These variations could not be explained solely by the size of the college, since both colleges with the lowest and highest number of GE course offerings were large institutions. On the whole, large and medium-sized colleges offered about the same number of GE courses (average of 192), which was almost twice as many GE course choices as small colleges offered (average of 102). Within each size category, however, we found noticeable high and low outliers in how many GE courses they listed.

General Education Course Offerings by Subject Matter Categories

When we examined community college GE programs by subject matter categories, we found similar requirements within each of the five major areas (*Arts and Humanities, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Natural Sciences, Communication and Composition, and Mathematics*), but major differences in the volume of GE course offerings. Table 3 displays the overall averages in GE requirements and approved course offerings for each category. It also displays the wide range of GE course offerings found among colleges—the lowest and highest number of approved GE courses listed within each size group of colleges in the study for the five GE subject

categories. All 30 colleges consistently required a single course in *Mathematics* and two or three courses in each of the other four GE subject area categories.

Table 3

Number of Required and Approved General Education Courses by Subject Areas at Large, Medium, and Small U.S. Community Colleges

General Education Subject Areas	Average # Required Courses	Average # GE Course Options (Range of course options)		
		Large Colleges	Medium Colleges	Small Colleges
Arts & Humanities	3	63 (16 – 153)	72 (12 – 167)	29 (10 – 65)
Social & Behavioral Sciences	2	35 (11 – 144)	42 (9 – 64)	22 (9 – 50)
Natural Sciences	2	31 (18 – 63)	33 (5 – 91)	21 (5 – 41)
Communication & Composition	3	7 (3 – 32)	14 (2 – 24)	4 (2 – 11)
Mathematics	1	11 (2 – 18)	10 (3 – 27)	8 (3 – 15)

Colleges tended to offer the greatest number of GE course options in *Arts and Humanities* and the least 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.

Within each size group of colleges, the wide-ranging course offerings extended across all discipline categories. For each subject area, we found colleges of all sizes offering very high and very low numbers of GE course options. Interestingly, the highest number of course offerings for three of the subject categories were found in medium-sized colleges. Overall, small colleges listed fewer GE course options. However, we found small colleges in the study sample that offered more GE courses than some large colleges. Clearly, institutional size was not the only determinant of how many GE course options were presented to students.

Arts & Humanities

The greatest number of GE course options across the subject area categories were found in *Arts and Humanities*, with as many as 167 choices for 3 required courses. Colleges required students to choose two or three courses in this area from an overall average of 55 alternatives. Large and medium-sized colleges approved 63 and 72 arts and humanities courses on average, while small colleges averaged 29 on their lists of approved courses.

Social and Behavioral Sciences

In the *Social and Behavioral Sciences* category, students had to complete one to three GE courses from an average of 33 options. The number of courses offered in this category ranged from 9 to 144 across all sizes of institutions. Eight of the 10 large colleges listed fewer than 31 courses to meet GE requirements in this area, but only three medium colleges had such parsimonious offerings. Six medium colleges and one small college approved 50 or more social and behavioral science courses to meet a two-course requirement.

Natural Sciences

In the *Natural Sciences* category, colleges required students to choose two from a pool averaging 28 approved courses. We found smaller overall differences in course options in this GE area, with large colleges averaging 31 options, medium-sized colleges averaging 33, and small colleges averaging 21 courses. Colleges listed as few as 5 and as many as 91 science courses for options to meet this GE requirement.

Communication & Composition

Despite the potpourri of terms colleges used to name this GE subject area, *Communication and Composition* was one of the two categories in which students were given little choice and the subject area with the greatest curricular consensus among colleges.

Community colleges across the country required two or three courses to be completed from a list of three to seven courses for this subject area. More than half the colleges offered no choice of courses and required specific English composition/rhetoric or speech courses.

Mathematics

Consensus was also evident around *Mathematics* requirements. All 30 colleges listed one college-level math course as a graduation requirement, to be completed from an average of 10 possible courses. For most students, these options were actually only two or three, since many courses on approved GE mathematics lists (e.g., Trigonometry, Calculus, Differential Equations) had prerequisites of other courses on the list. Several institutions simply stated the requirement as completion of a particular college-level mathematics course “or higher.”

Colleges treated the knowledge areas of *Mathematics* and *Communication and Composition* similarly, placing more limits on options from which students could choose. In both these GE categories, many colleges required a specific course or two, a limitation not found in other categories. This finding demonstrates that colleges and faculty are not inherently opposed to creating a limited common core of learning. Seemingly, the common core that educators felt most comfortable mandating is still “*readin’ and writin’ and ‘rithmetic.*”

Other General Education Categories and Requirements

All but seven colleges in the study had one or two GE requirements in varying subject areas beyond the five they all shared. The most common was termed simply *History*. Most colleges included history and political science in their *Social and Behavioral Sciences* offerings. However, nine colleges specified a separate history (or history/government/political science) requirement—typically calling for one to two courses to be completed from four to eight approved options. One institution asked for a course in Federal Government and one in Texas

Government. One college named this category *History-Cultures* and included 33 course options in history, languages, culture, and religion.

The second most common “other” category was a grouping of humanities, social sciences, and specialized courses under headings variously dubbed *Global Perspectives*; *Global Issues/Diversity*; *Culture, Diversity, and Equity*; *Multicultural Education*; *Diversity*; or *Human Relations*. The disciplines among these groupings varied, but all six colleges with such a requirement called for one course from a listing of 21 to 86 designated courses. Three others also specified a *Diversity* requirement but cross-referenced the approved courses for this area with other GE course listings, allowing for double counting across categories.

Four colleges (one large, two medium-sized, and one small) required a course in *Physical Education/Dance*, *Health and Physical Education*, *Exercise Science*, or *Wellness* from lists of 34, 21, 45 and 7 options, respectively. Four called for a specific student success course, variously named *Student Success*, *College Transfer Success*, or *First Year Experience*. Three colleges specified a GE category for technology skills—*Technology*, *Computer Skills*, *Computer/Statistics/Quantitative Applications*—and required one course from a list of two to 11. One medium-sized college required a single course from a list of 31 to fulfill *Lifelong Learning*. One small college called for one course in *Ethical Reasoning* from a list of seven.

Summary of Findings

Across all 30 colleges in this study, we found strong agreement in their stated philosophies about GE, in the disciplinary categories included in their GE programs, and in the number of GE courses they required students to complete to satisfy core learning requirements to graduate with an associate degree. 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. Most college GE offerings were closer to the middle, with large and medium-sized institutions authorizing 192 and small colleges approving 102 GE courses, on average.

With common philosophies, common GE accreditation expectations, and common GE subject areas, 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 general education, our findings point to the reality that the nation’s current community college general education programs continue to project the “*cafeteria curriculum*.”

Conclusions & 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. Community colleges in our study followed the traditional, yet much-maligned *distribution model* of general education that has students take a course or two in a checked-box approach from several broad fields of study (Jaschik, 2016). Nearly a third of the colleges in the study listed over 20 times the number of GE courses than they required (two topped the chart, with 41 and 49 options for each required course).

Students and a Surfeit of Choices

In contradiction to our deeply ingrained American love of freedom and choice, research in cognitive and behavioral science has repeatedly demonstrated that having too many choices is detrimental to decision making and even happiness (Iyengar, 2011; Schwartz, 2004). *Paradox of choice* (having an excess of good options to choose from causes stress and inhibits decision-making rather than inducing happiness and satisfaction), *analysis paralysis* (stagnation in decision-making stemming from overanalyzing a surfeit of data), and *anticipated regret* (a prospective sense of regret that one might feel if they make a wrong choice) are three key psychological factors that negatively affect students when confronting confusing course selections. Consider the stress of students required to choose two courses from a list of 167!

In *The Shapeless River*, an evocative and evidentiary review of how the high-choice, low structure curriculum model in many community colleges thwarts student decisions and progress, Judith Scott-Clayton (2011) of the Community College Research Center observed, “for many

students at community colleges, finding a path to degree completion is the equivalent of navigating a river on a dark night” (p.1). She underscored how it particularly affects vulnerable populations: “This unstructured complexity may be the most daunting for disadvantaged students—particularly first-generation college students” (p.14).

All students ultimately want the same thing—success and happiness. As educators, do we not owe them *both* freedom of choice and directional support? The reasons for a plethora of GE course offerings are many, but our research suggests that tough, collective decisions need to be made to whittle down options to a manageable size and provide a meaningful rationale to support informed choices. Otherwise, those students who need community colleges the most never find their way through our dark curricular waters to a meaningful and productive life.

Guiding Students through the Cafeteria

The purpose of academic advising is to help students select a program of study to meet their life and vocational goals. As such, academic advising is a central and important activity in the process of education...Few student support functions occur as often or affect so many students (O’Banion, 1972, p. 62).

The 2018 national report on the power of advising in community colleges by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) concurred, “Students and faculty consistently report that advising is the most important student service that colleges offer” (p.1). While everyone agrees on the value of academic advising, there is little agreement on how to correct the primary barrier to effective advising that has been the elephant in the room for many decades: the devastating and impossible ratio of advisors to students. With high numbers of part-time students, community colleges traditionally have impossibly high student-to-advisor ratios, with advisors typically serving 1,000 students each (Marcus, 2012). One advisor stated plainly, “Our caseloads . . . are still too large to really be able to follow up with students. . . . In a perfect world, we’d have three times the number of advisors” (CCCSE, 2018, p.3). The stress of the

COVID-19 pandemic in the past year has turned up the heat on advisors and counselors, adding remote services and rising mental health challenges to the profusion of student needs. Confusing or seemingly irrelevant GE course requirements don't help the situation.

We found promise among colleges riding the wave of Guided Pathways reforms sweeping the country, like those from the Tennessee system as cataloged by the Community College Research Center (Jenkins et al., 2018). Some colleges are reassigning general academic advisors to focus on students in a single meta-major and provide more personal and specific academic/career guidance. A few have moved to a caseload model, where students have a consistent, assigned academic advisor throughout their stay at the college. Others are hiring a new class of paraprofessionals called *student success navigators* or *coaches* to shoulder parts of the advisor's outreach and engagement duties. But these movements frequently face institutional resistance and mark slow progress compared to student needs. As former Community College Research Center director Thomas Bailey (2017) noted, "redesigning advising is one of the most challenging parts of colleges' guided pathways work." (p.12)

Missing Curricular Cohesion

Our study made it quite clear that community colleges share a strong consensus on the knowledge area framework for their GE programs—*Arts and Humanities, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Natural Sciences, Communication and Composition, and Mathematics*. Every college used these classifications (with some variation in nomenclature). All restricted (and often specified) course options in *Communication and Composition* and *Mathematics*. This is as close as the colleges came to sharing a common core of learning.

But the curricular commonalities we found across GE programs were only skin deep, and we also found little evidence of deeper curricular cohesion *within* individual college GE

programs. As noted, most of the 30 colleges in this study expressed virtuous aspirations for their GE programs to prepare graduates to face the world as well-rounded, enlightened individuals ready to participate fully in a democracy. All seven regional accreditors call for GE programs to be “coherent and substantive,” as NECHE puts it. But the only coherence or substance apparent within most GE programs we examined across the country in colleges large and small—at least by way of information provided to students and the public—were long lists of disciplinary-focused courses under common subject headings from most of the colleges’ departments. A few colleges seemed to simply offer fewer choices in their curricular cafeterias.

Several colleges outlined specific Institutional Learning Outcomes or General Education Outcomes that their GE courses are expected to fulfill. One large college even offered assurance that every approved GE course must relate to at least three overarching learning outcomes. But even with these potentially motivating justifications, students were left to sort among dozens of course options and wait to receive course syllabi after enrolling to learn which core gems of knowledge they might encounter in any given course.

This traditional structuring of general education programs, in which students choose one of these, plus two of those—known as the *distribution model*—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 coherence, promoting discipline-centric turf protection, encouraging students to seek easy options, and promoting siloed thinking (Hanstedt, 2020; Jaschik, 2016; Reed, 2019). Some say the intent embedded in its loosely coupled 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 general education plan.

How did this Happen?

The fragmentation of the common curriculum idea may stem from the increasing specialization that is characteristic of advanced societies. Knowing more and more about less and less has created research agendas that made the U.S. an international leader in innovation and boosted its corporations into global powerhouses. In education, this trend led to multitudes of specialty and subspecialty programs that would boggle our grandparents. *Health Information Management, Video Game Design, or Viticulture and Enology*, anyone? One college in this study offers 257 degrees and certificates as they strive to meet rising demands and shifting workforce needs. Thoughtful community college leaders may feel the pull toward a new common core of learning, but most are consumed with organizational impacts of economic and social upheaval while striving to prepare workers for fluctuating current and future jobs. And who can blame them, when state, federal, and corporate funds in the billions of dollars are driving their agendas.

The most common critique for the proliferation of GE course distribution lists—termed *general education creep* or *bloat*—is self-interest of academic departments and faculty in garnering student enrollment. *Inside Higher Ed*'s resident community college dean and blogger Matt Reed (2019), put it bluntly:

Getting gen ed status for a course -- or, ideally, getting gen ed requirement status for a course -- insulates it against enrollment pressures. Alternately, stripping gen ed status from a course -- or demoting it to a nondefault option within a category - - presents an economic threat to the affected department. Departments know that. (para.7)

But does this strategy really work? When a student must choose one course from a list of 63, does the special course submitted by Professor X get selected enough times to keep it viable?

The course may have a better chance if it has a trendy title, but most courses we reviewed had traditional titles. What difference does it make if students are checking off their GE lists by checking out RateMyProfessor.com and going for the easy grade?

We found no evidence that faculty are alone in creating the cafeteria curriculum. Yes, faculty create the courses and the curriculum, but all courses and programs must be reviewed and approved by larger curricular and governing bodies, often at state levels. Plus, two-year college GE programs have long been at the receiving end of transfer universities willingness to accept their courses. Many institutions in this study referenced state GE cores and regional or state articulation agreements aimed at protecting community college GE transfer credits. Curiously, these did not seem to restrict GE bloat, except in those colleges in strong, centralized state governing systems with tight-fisted control over GE requirements and course approvals.

It is more 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 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 species, and obscure all traces of the original design. The general education 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 any needed weeding or provide a vision for a new plot. The ultimate question is why change now?

A Proposal for Essential Education for All Students

We propose that a return to the idea of a common core of essential learning could solve many institutional problems surrounding general education and provide clarity and creative inspiration for students. There would be no more confusion, decision anxiety, or questions of relevance from asking students to choose two *Social and Behavioral Sciences* courses from a list of 64. Instead, a handful of thoughtfully designed courses (or modules or experiences) required as an *Essential Education* would reduce stress for students and advisors alike. Customized core learning experiences for meta-majors or career pathways could bring focus and direction in place of a hodgepodge of hit-or-miss courses. A succinct description of an essential core in the college catalog would be a vivid improvement over pages of mind-numbing lists, charts, and narratives outlining complex GE programs. As one student recommended in a focus group on student success, “If you know what students need, and we don’t, why don’t you make us do it?” (McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012, p.57).

A common core of learning also could add value to other college systems. Registration would be streamlined for students and staff not having to contend with congested lists of competing courses. Scheduling classes, managing departmental budgets, hiring part-time faculty and tutors, and developing high-quality free OER textbooks and resources for a predictable common core would be simpler for chairs, deans, and faculty. Even assessment, program improvement, and accreditation monitoring and reporting would be more effective if concentrated on a more focused, cohesive plan.

We are not naïve about the barriers to adopting such a proposal, and we acknowledge the perennial GE philosophical tug-o-war between “choice and prescription” (Mintz, 2020, p.6) that has swung the GE pendulum for more than a century. One powerful inspiration for our argument comes from our review of the literature on community college GE practices, which exposed how

starkly little attention has been paid to the topic and how even less these programs have changed in eons. One of the most recent comprehensive national studies of community college GE programs we found was conducted more than 20 years ago (Path & Hammons, 1999) and concluded the majority were “little more than a pale copy of the distribution requirements of the nearest four-year college or university” (p.467). The researchers sharply criticized community colleges for abandoning their ideals of innovation and change to become “bastions of academic cowardice.... perfectly content, like their university counterparts, with the status quo” (p.478).

We do not believe a lack of courage is the central obstacle to general education reform today, as most community college folks we know are fighting the good fight under impressively difficult circumstances to provide the best education possible for all who want it. The problem seems to be more about countless competing demands. We contend change in general education is happening nonetheless, either incrementally through the creeping overgrowth of “anything goes” GE course options or imperatively, through external regulations aimed at reducing waste and accelerating student throughput. So why not steer the change to purposefully address new societal and student needs? What we are calling for is leveraging the promising reform work underway on so many campuses, such as *Guided Pathways*, *Achieving the Dream*, *Caring Campus*, and *Race & Equity Alliance*. These efforts are gathering the best minds and hearts in the institution to clear out old barriers and build better pathways to student access, equity, and success. Why not also have them provide a fresh focus on a common core of essential learning that could undergird this institutional reform through the centerpiece of education that crosses all majors and touches all students?

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