

General Education and the Geneseo Experience

At an All-College meeting on May 6, 2009, President Dahl laid out the choices facing SUNY Geneseo in a time of state and national economic crisis. Geneseo, he said, could respond to the crisis with reactive cuts and downsizing, or it could respond with creative strategic thinking. Resolving to take the latter course, President Dahl introduced six major strategic initiatives, the *Six Big Ideas*. Briefly stated, these are as follows:

- **Bring Theory to Practice** in order to promote transformational learning, integrate disparate efforts to achieve synergy, and guarantee that all students will have at least one high-impact learning experience during their careers at Geneseo.
- **Create Innovative Five-Year Professional Programs** in order to move to the cutting edge of best practice and reinforce our distinctive identity as a public liberal arts college.
- **Expand Instructional Delivery** through innovative approaches to summer courses, graduate education, and non-traditional time slots.
- **Re-think the Course Load** in order to create new alignments between teaching and learning.
- **Create a Center for Collaborative Research** in order to secure funding for undergraduate research, multidisciplinary research, rural economic development, physical science projects, and more.
- **Create a Center for Strategic Community Partnerships** in order to support internships; action-based community research; projects such as Microenterprise, Livingston/CARES, Geneseo/South Wedge Revitalization; and joint work with organizations such as RCSD and the Small Business Development Center.

Central to this discussion is the question of what a Geneseo graduate should know and experience.

Any discussion of the Six Big Ideas must of necessity focus on the mission of the College and on the kinds of learning experiences students should have. What is it that students should learn? What are essential skills for the 21st century? Are there essential ideas and concepts that all students should gain or is the mission of the College to awaken a desire for life-long learning? How can we ensure that students do learn what is deemed essential? Should the “Geneseo experience” be transformational? Can we accomplish our goals within the present curricular structure?

According to the College’s Mission Statement, “The entire college community works together to develop socially responsible citizens with skills and values important to the pursuit of an enriched life and success in the world.” This is accomplished by a combination of “a rigorous curriculum and a rich co-curricular life to create a learning-centered environment.” More specifically, the values the College wishes to instill in both students and faculty are as follows:

- **Excellence**, and upholds high standards for intellectual inquiry and scholarly achievement;
- **Innovation**, and affirms a spirit of exploration that fosters continued excellence;
- **Community**, and embraces the educational aspirations and interests that its members share;
- **Diversity**, and respects the unique contributions of each individual to the campus community;
- **Integrity**, and promotes the development of ethical citizens;
- **Service to Society**, and models the qualities it seeks to develop in its students;
- **Tradition**, and celebrates its long history of collaborative, learning-centered education.

Within this dialogue, we will focus on “the big picture.” Can we define what a Geneseo graduate should be and can we accomplish such development within our General Education requirements? It would seem appropriate to have similar discussions within majors and programs. Do our goals drive our course offerings or is it the other way around?

Approach 1: General Education Should be Broad-based and Transformational

Introduction

In the world of the future, lines between academic disciplines and ways of thought and problem-solving will be blurred. For example, the environmental challenges facing us have economic, behavioral, scientific elements to name a few. We see a similar discipline-specific transcendence in the current health care discussions. Any discussion of health policy must, of necessity, address issues of social justice, economics, and human behavior. To face these issues and other issues and to be an informed and participating citizen of the 21st century, graduating students need to be prepared by their educational experience for weighing information and diverse points of view, and making informed decisions that cross the narrow boundaries of academic disciplines represented by current College departments and majors.

Most students enter the College from traditional discipline-based high schools. In order to challenge their thinking and prepare them for the world beyond academia, the College should offer a radically different curriculum including a service-learning component that is transformational in nature and the culmination of their academic experience. In such an experience, students could use the knowledge they have gained facing real world challenges.

One way to address the needs of future graduates would be to offer a broad-based academic core to all students that is less course- and department-focused and is more transdisciplinary in nature, incorporating extra- and co-curricular activities. While it is recognized that this Approach is still imposed from the top and remains one in which students must fulfill certain academic course requirements, a transdisciplinary set of course offerings requires both students and faculty to reach across narrow disciplinary lines to identify problems and find solutions. In this way, the General Education core reflects the challenges students will face after graduation and the skills they will need to meet these challenges.

Supporter's Believe

- In the 21st century, students need to bring critical thinking skills and knowledge from a number of disciplines, thus a transdisciplinary model of education should be adopted.
- Faculty members have the expertise to identify those areas of study that will be vital for graduates in the future.

What Should Be Done

- General Education requirements should reflect the issues facing society and the skills needed to address these issues.
- General Education requirements should focus on transdisciplinary courses, incorporating extra-

and co-curricular activities.

- Include a service-learning component in the General Education requirements.

Trade-offs and Criticisms

- This is still a top-down model similar to the current one which is imposed upon students.
- This is just another version of “check-the-box” to complete your General Education requirement.
- This approach requires faculty to go beyond their usual disciplinary boundaries.
- Coordinating a service-learning component could be difficult to administer and inconvenient for students to accomplish.

Approach 2: Allow Students to Map Their Own Education

Introduction

As students prepare to engage in the local, national and international aspects of a diverse and globalized world, it is imperative that they not only be introduced to, but have an opportunity to immerse themselves in a number of disciplines from both a philosophical and theoretical perspective to support their intellectual, creative, personal and career goals. Rather than continue with a prescriptive General Education model, this approach provides students with an opportunity for intensive and focused study culminating in a terminal/capstone project demonstrating achievement of one’s self-defined learning goals. This approach recognizes the unique needs of each student when it comes to intellectual inquiry, embraces past learning experiences (e.g. study abroad, service learning, research), and recognizes that the learning outcomes can be achieved in a less prescribed, cross-disciplinary manner.

Early in their freshman year each student, under the guidance of a faculty mentor, would assume responsibility for developing an individualized plan with clearly stated learning outcomes. These outcomes would be addressed through a series of courses. The choice of courses would be left to the individual student, in consultation with their faculty mentor, thus enabling them to pursue their own self-defined interests within the general confines of their declared academic major. A minor or terminal/capstone project could be structured in such a way as to facilitate an introduction to theoretical and methodological approaches across disciplines, while providing more specialized knowledge. This approach provides a general education to students by stimulating critical inquiry and free thinking, and focusing attention to the construction of knowledge rather than on knowledge itself.

Supporters Believe

- This approach engages students in active learning and discovery by enabling them to define their own unique learning needs and design their own unique course of study.
- This approach offers flexibility through the development of an individualized plan that addresses a variety of intellectual issues across disciplines and cultures.
- A self-designed terminal/capstone project would provide each student with a unique “high impact” learning opportunity that serves to support their academic and career goals and advance their potential.

What Should Be Done

- Radically redefine a liberal General Education.
- Draft some guidelines to be used in advising students on constructing their General Education plan of study.

Trade-offs and Criticisms

- Students, particularly first year students, may not have the knowledge to organize and construct their own General Education.
- The entire system is open to fads and whims rather than reflective contemplation of perceived needs for the 21st century.
- It would be extremely difficult to administer individualized curricula in order to insure that each student gains a broad enough base of knowledge and skills.
- A terminal experience would be an extra burden on already stressed students.

Approach 3: Leave It As It Is

Introduction

Traditional General Education curricula are carefully crafted to reflect their perspective of what constitutes a comprehensive and effective discipline-based Liberal Arts education. At Geneseo, for example, the course requirements (i.e., two natural science, social science, and fine arts courses; an intense humanities sequence; a U.S. history course; a non-western tradition course, a critical writing and reading course, a symbolic and numerical reasoning course, and the language requirement) exceed the requirements for general education set forth by the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York in 1998.

“If common goals and common values are essential to a learning community, so, too, are common knowledge and common skills. To put such knowledge and skills in the hands of every student is one purpose of the [current] general education curriculum at SUNY Geneseo” (<http://gened.geneseo.edu>).

What Supporters Believe

- By providing a structured general education core as exemplified by the current system, Geneseo establishes a unified community brought together by common goals, values, knowledge, and skills.
- The substance of the current general education curriculum provides students with the skills and knowledge to participate effectively in a free society; specifically, it prepares students to make effective choices concerning the environment, public health, technology, justice, equality, diversity, freedom of expression and public art and cultural perspectives, and to understand their role and position in the global society.

What Should Be Done

- Leave the current general education curriculum intact not only because it was carefully crafted by those who share the mission of Geneseo but also because it is accomplishing the goals of a liberal arts education and the State University of New York.

Trade-offs and Criticisms

- This is more of the same which in practice amounts to little more than requirements students fulfill with little thought to the outcome.
- Department- or discipline-based General Education does not reflect the current and future needs of college graduates.