

## **How Can General Education Be Innovative?**

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### **Abstract**

General education in colleges is practiced with the intention of producing well rounded students, able to apply their education in more ways than just one career field. However, this comes with backlash from students who believe that their education should not be structured like this, because they view general education as a waste of time, with refutes such as when would an English major ever need to know Calculus. This paper is an exploration of how general education can be innovative instead of tedious in a person's education, how it can be structured in order to produce well rounded people, well versed in all subjects rather than one narrow topic. With the use of interviews with students, teachers, and administration, along with many models of education from the past dating back to medieval universities and modern universities, this research paper will discover ways in which general education has failed and ways in which it can be structured innovatively. Its purpose is to piece together models of general education in order to understand the ways in which students learn and how a liberal education can deepen a student's ability to learn and function in a democratic society.

**Keywords: Education, General Education, Liberal Arts**

### **1. Introduction**

General Education requirements in four-year universities take up most of the first two years of a student's college education. They take classes in many different fields beyond their major. The intention of such a program is to help a student's education be broad enough where the person is able to take their education and apply it in more than just one field and also be able to communicate well with other fields because they have a general understanding of things outside of just their career. However, this is not being implemented correctly at every university. The teachers are not doing a good job in making their courses broad enough to apply to other fields and the universities are not explaining the intrinsic value of general education to their students well enough. This is creating an epidemic of students with the mindset that their general education classes are not to be taken seriously, are not to be thought deeply of, and are just things they need to get out of the way. This is leading general education to fail its students and fail to give education the broad value it needs to be successful.

Many people see the liberal arts broad approach to education to be unnecessary and unsuccessful. Parents push their children to take jobs in specialized career fields such as engineering and medical fields because they believe that these jobs are better for financial stability. This is reliant on the idea that success in money and that the purpose of an education is to get a degree that provides you with a job that will get you job stability and good pay. Even the Governor of North Carolina, Pat McCrory, as he endorsed legislation of bills of education funding, defined the success of education as post graduate employment rather than enrollment and degrees (Wintrol). This idea is not just seen by Pat McCrory but within the parents of students enrolled in colleges, other public figures. Therefore, students are conditioned to feel this way. This makes the future of liberal arts look bleak. The reason for this is that the liberal arts are not doing a well enough job of outlining the intrinsic value that comes with learning deeply in many subjects. The

liberal arts are very important in teaching students how to live and how to look at the world which is important to a democratic society for it to have citizens with a deeply educated perspective, able to see beyond just their career and communicate with other cultures, careers, and mindsets. This value is more than tuition and is more than a well-paying job because it benefits society and not just the individual. It is beneficial for all to be taught by a university to think differently and to look deeper at their education and to gain more knowledge about the world around them. This deep ideal is not being carried out correctly and needs to be remodeled.

## 2. History

Liberal Arts Education has been a model of education since ancient Greece and Rome. The term “artes liberales” in Latin, meaning for free men. It was used in Rome to describe the skills and knowledge that was needed to be someone who could vote in Roman society and be an effective citizen (Wintrol). This can be parallel today, showing that intrinsic value of the liberal arts is to help our democratic society have an educated mass who may make good decisions for itself. General Education’s roots are in the creation of the liberal arts education. Cicero, a Roman philosopher and politician, believed and argued for the intrinsic values of the liberal arts in general education. He believed that general education was “training” for citizenship in a democratic society and also was important to lifelong learning and perspective. Cicero believed that human excellence would be achieved through general education and that it was necessary in man's place in context with other men. (Wolfe) This is still important today. In the United States, until the Civil war colleges were still religious entities, with extremely regulatory and enforced curriculum and rather than the focus being expanding the mind, the focus was building character. Classroom life in this time was spent building this character, with a curriculum in math, logic, English, and classics. The students did not feel like their education was to its full potential in the classroom. Most students felt as though they learned the most out of hands on learning experiences, clubs, literary societies, and debates with fellow students. This all led to an issue because most the education at the time was focused on enforcing the strict rules of behavior rather than the education, from this in 1850 to 1870 there was a sharp decrease in students even enrolled in American universities. The country rushed to change this issue, some schools radical reforming into free choice education models which got rid of any requirements for the student and left the student free to choose whatever study they wanted to. Harvard even took to this model (Bok). As a result of this lots of colleges across the United States had to reform. There were posters posted on many campuses that said, “Do not let your studies interfere with your education” (Bok). This radical idea sparking, even more, reform in education. This idea that an extremely regulated education actually is negative towards a student's education. The free choice method was not a good method either, to just let the students have all the choice. Because it is discontinuous and limiting in its own right because it fragments the education. It creates large amounts of knowledge in scattered placing giving the student no direction to take their degree to. It was criticized that at this time Harvard “Taught little and taught ill” (Adams) and soon it abolished the free choice model.

After World War II, higher education tried again to reform. The model then was an early failing model of general education again. The model had each student pick a certain number of courses in the three major division of education such as humanities, science, and social sciences. (Bok) And this was not even the consensus between all the universities at the time, still, many different universities had many different ideas of what would be the most efficient way to construct a general education model for its students. With this, although today we still in America face issues of how general education should be set up, many students since the 1970s are turning toward specialization more than ever before. (Bok) This is probably because of the necessary degree needed to get a good job in today's job market and also the societal norm that the liberal arts are useless and hard to find a career in. The people on the job market for higher jobs has increased since the 1970s because of women’s rights and the ability to become executives and to work in more fields than ever before. This desire for vocational education over the liberal arts education also leads to colleges to have more vocational programs and more students enrolled. Colleges argue that the main reason for offering these programs in specialized fields over liberal arts fields is that it will facilitate them into the labor market and give them the skills they need quicker with just a Bachelors in Arts, in order to make them productive at an earlier point. (Hall) Vocational education and general education impact of these two education models upon an economy. Sweden, a transitional education model, launched a reform at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to transition vocational education programs to have more general education requirements, comparing its current employment of those students to what it was before the reform. This is important because as Sweden transitions between the two models, it can be observed as a model for where general education should or should not go. They found that the extra year the students had to take in order to fulfill the general education requirements yielded more drop outs in the program, but it did not yield fewer or less employments. This model reveals that the correlation between jobs and a general education may not be very large, but the intrinsic value is still there. Still, students need a deeper learning experience in more than

one field in order to be knowledgeable in more than one field and in order to understand more than just their career, in order to be better people for a democratic society.

### **3. Effective and Ineffective Models of General Education**

Beyond just the structure of general education in universities, there is a huge issue within the actual benefits of general education courses in college today. Students are not gaining the knowledge that they need in order to live up to the ideal of a broader liberal education. Just taking four introductory courses in a foreign language does not make the students fluent, just taking a few science courses and math courses does not make the students proficient in the subjects. Instead, these students are just getting a small taste of these subjects without actually gaining proficiency in the subjects that are needed to for them to actually use the skills they learned. Even when students had good things to say about their professors and the course, students reported that less than 10% of the general education courses they took did they feel like their thinking and skills improved significantly. (Bok) If the students do not know enough about the topic to use it or to understand it deeply, then the structure of these requirements is not working efficiently.

Through interviews with students from general education courses at Appalachian State University, a model of the real life perspective of how students view the courses they are required to take was formed. Five students from general education classes, such as Philosophy and Popular Culture and Global Climate Change were asked a series of questions in order to examine their outlook on the general education requirements they need to fulfill. They were asked how they feel about their general education requirements, what they think the purpose of them is, and what they gained from these courses. The students all had a very similar outlook that general education was something they needed to just get out of the way and believed general education's purpose was to broaden their education but they didn't think it was necessary. The survey showed that the average student from these classes do not see the benefit of general education as a whole in their academic endeavors and that shows an issue within the system and how it integrates learning. If the students do not even understand the purpose of their general education, then it is very difficult for the classes to make any lasting impression on the student's knowledge on the subject. The motivation to learn in these courses just was not there. Most students commented on how their major did not need advanced math or sciences but they still were required to take a course on this subject. The students while commenting on the purpose of the general education courses was to help them think deeper still thought of the courses as useless and boring. If the teachers or the university provide examples and reasons for the true importance of general education, maybe the student's mindsets would change, and maybe the students would gain more. In a study by Amicucci, Michelle Williams, Sarah Decapua, and John Hrebik, they found by identifying the values of a class such literature as an example of a general education course, on all majors and the freedom of the course to choose what books to read, books related to their interests and majors, classes yielded higher grades from the students but also a deeper appreciation for the subject that they came in the course not possessing. The students felt more engaged and felt they gained actual skills in the subject that were important to life. The study links the freedom of the students to choose what books to read also related better to their course of study and academic plans. The teachers also say that at this point in the course when they let the books be chosen by the student that these are the moments where the students are able to be more deeply be engaged in the class conversations, but the students come out of the course with a love for literature.

At Appalachian State University, the vice provost of undergraduate education, Mike Mayfield is extremely committed to perfecting the general education model in order to benefit the undergraduate student's education experience. When asked his opinion of general education, its benefits and how he thinks it should be structured innovatively and what he would say to the students who wonder when they will ever use their general education requirements in life and responded with a metaphor. He said you will never know what you need in life and that general education is like a toolkit of knowledge to draw from for the rest of your life and career. He believes it exercising the student's brains like a workout and makes them stronger better students and that everyone needs improvement. Mayfield believed the common reading was the most important part of the general education model. College is about the conversations that take place about what you are learning, organically, and the process with other students. Common reading gives a common ground for these conversations to take place so that the students are able to have this experience. Also, he highlighted that general education also helps nurture these conversations too. If students only took classes in their major they would be surrounded by one mindset, and that general education classes bring together students from all departments together, to have conversations about their education. On the topic of jobs, Mayfield believed that the employment is extremely necessary for the argument of liberal arts and general education. He said he read a study about how Google says they want to hire students who have liberal arts majors because this shows that they can think critically, work in a community, understand others, and be better people to

employ. Data shows that liberal arts prepare you for whatever can come next because the actual data shows the liberal arts and humanities are good at preparing you for what employers actually want. They value broad liberal education rather than just specific education. Creative, communication, innovation, context to the global world, team building. Full college experience more than the major. He said that a handful of majors like engineering, give good money right out the door, but the liberal arts degrees are typically holding higher positions than the narrowly focused because the professionals cannot connect with others because they are too narrowly focused to their degree. Mike Mayfield explained to me the issues that he has experienced with general education, such as the structure. Universities have been battling over what university classes should be like since the beginning. Today the majority of requirements for a college degree are 120 semester hours, general education needs to be 30, each discipline must have specific requirements overall and the school. Other issues being that the trajectory of society shows that most students are doing something that didn't really exist when they graduated. It could have nothing to do with the narrow major that is created for them, to prepare for careers that don't exist yet. To have a narrow degree could go out of style and the student would be out of a job. Most graduates do not work in the exact field they thought they would when they graduated. Things change and a liberal degree prepares graduates for this change in society.

Mike Mayfield explained that at Appalachian State University, the best part of general education structure besides the common reading is the integrative learning experience the liberal studies. The students are required to take a certain number of hours in these areas in order to give their general education more purpose and more ways to be integrated into their interests and major. At Appalachian State from the 1970s to 2005, they had general education called core curriculum which was a model that was the complete opposite of Harvard's 1910 free choice model. All four years were planned for the student, they checked boxes in all the subjects in order to get a degree and left no room for electives so students could not pick what they wanted to learn. In 2008, Appalachian State changed their structure again. They worked for 3 years to create what current general education should be. It is a less ambitious approach where you take the courses in the theme, insisting that the disciplines to the courses that promote deep learning. It is not confined in narrow places it is able to be connected to all areas. The integrative learning experience connects themes to one idea.

A current model for general education that is effective was created with the priorities of current world affairs, deep learning, and innovation. These ideals are essential qualities that students need to have in order to implement the tenants of the liberal arts in the real world. The model was created at the Conference of College Learning for the New Global Century, by the Association American Colleges and Universities. The conference calling upon universities to prioritize their general education programs and benefits. It outlines the outcomes it believes are a priority for students in college that are related to the current, ever-changing world that the students live in. It calls for the education system to provide students with knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative learning. It outlines a general education system that is not one size fits all but instead able to be different for each student while fulfilling the same requirements that LEAP requires from educational institutions. This reports all of the aims of the current general education system in the United States and what it hopes to accomplish and how it is structured to achieve this. It believes that these ideals produce well rounded graduates in many fields besides the major but also creates educated people ready to live within a democratic society. It is essential for a society to have a good education system that is diverse in subject matter in order to create worldly citizens able to be connected to the whole world, and not just their country as a result of the global economic system the world has transitioned into. If citizens of America do not have the knowledge to connect with people from all over the world, different mindsets, cultures, ideas, then the education system is failing them. The liberal education should be structured in a way that it can help students communicate with all people, understand a wide range of subjects and understand their responsibility to the world and not just to themselves. The national leadership council "challenges the conventional view that liberal education is, by definition, non-vocational." It wants to merge these two paths of education into one, something that is essential to bridge the gap between the liberal arts and general education in order to make it innovative. This is similar to how Sweden added more general education courses into its vocational programs with the intent of broadening the student's knowledge. This model outlines that the arts and sciences are essential in any education even vocational education, because of the benefits for communication, technology creativity, global innovation, and these things that the arts and sciences provide, are important to any field or career path, from artist to scientist to mathematician. They believe that their aims that were outlined are important in any college, any vocational program, any training for careers. This general education system should not just be for people who are studying the arts at a liberal arts university but instead for all professions, all technical fields, and in any major. This, however, cannot just be done by the general education model, these goals must be achieved by the major, the teacher in every classroom, and the student. If these things and people do not work together to achieve these aims, then the whole system will not work. Which makes it very hard to implement, but still extremely important. If over 63% of employers do not think that the recent college graduates have the skills they need

to succeed in a global economy, because they were trained in the old ways and are way too small scale, (LEAP) then there needs to be a change in the way higher education is set up so that graduates may be prepared to go into their work fields, to go into the world and be effective. This is the goal of education, knowledge, and practice and the higher education system is failing its students by not having innovative general education. If 56 percent of employers believe the fix for this issue is giving students a broader more well-rounded education, because this will provide more skills in a larger world and specific field, the weight must be put upon the general education rather than the major.

General education needs to move with the times. Every single model created for General education needs to have the ability to be fluid, to be able to progress as societies to progress, be able to change as new technology is invented, as new skills are needed to be able to be functional in an ever-changing world. If the model for general education is concrete and unable to change and flow with time, the model is failing to give its students what they really need. If students are in universities preparing for degrees that may not even exist yet, preparing for fields not yet invented, and preparing to be innovators, inventors of these new careers and new fields, the students must be given a liberal, creative, innovative education, that can only be given to a student through an effective general education model. One that fosters difference, without the one size fits all model, one that provides many life skills, many skills from many fields, making mathematics students literate in the classics of literature, and theater majors proficient in calculus, not because they will necessarily need these skills, but because these skills can benefit them in so many other ways. The benefits being, understanding other fields so that they can understand their own field in context with others, communication with other careers and fields when doing business and collaboration, leadership, and sensibility. People who are able to understand the world and not just themselves. People who know the history of the world and other countries and other cultures, languages, and are not limited to their own perspective. These are the best workers. These are the type of workers companies like Google says that they look for when they hire students. They don't just look at what field the degree is in, but what liberal arts school, what general education program fostered these students into having the skills they value for the evolving world.

#### **4. Conclusion**

General Education has been growing since ancient times. It has risen and fallen in time, sometimes benefiting its students and sometimes failing them. It is hard to know what the exact perfect model for general education is and for hundreds of years, no one has been able to come to a consensus over what would be the best model for general education. However, what is concrete is the things that the students must gain from general education. They must learn skills in many fields, be proficient in many fields, have a deeper understanding of the world and cultures around them, good communication skills, and be able to innovate their career and selves as the world changes in time. Even with such a consensus, the biggest issue is not the model, but the way that general education is carried out by universities, teachers, and classroom structure. Without the university, the course leaders, and classes outlining the value of general education and the liberal arts to its students, none of these objectives can be achieved for the student, because they will see their general education as a waste of time and something they need to get through before their education matters, rather than seeing that general education is one of the most important and impressionable parts of their higher education and degree. Today, models like the one created at the Conference of College Learning for the New Global Century are influencing higher education at universities such as Appalachian State University as they strive to make a better model for general education.

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