

**“General Education Models: Pros & Cons of General Education Strategies”  
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**“Liberal General Education at Michigan State University – Integrative Studies”**

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Periodic discussion about liberal general education in American higher education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has coincided with the rise to predominance of the modern research university. Concern about, and cyclical renewed attention to, the issue of general education in the undergraduate curriculum has coexisted with the general triumph of academic specialization. Institutionally, faculty and departments in the university reflect increasingly specialized disciplinary interests, and curricula reflect the increasingly fragmented approaches of disciplinary specialists. How then introduce students to general knowledge of the world? How help students to become generally educated, freed to think more effectively and independently? Writing in 1963 in The Uses of the University, Clark Kerr described the modern university as “a new type of institution” lacking a “single vision” or “purpose,” but loosely conjoining a multiplicity of purposes. In the modern university, the production of specialized knowledge flourished most, Kerr observed, but liberal (general) education suffered. More recently, Kerr noted that liberal general education is “in retreat” more than ever.<sup>1</sup>

This is perhaps true – many claim this to be true in books appearing on the corporate university or the university in ruins<sup>2</sup> – but it is also true in recent years that we have witnessed renewed debate and conversation about, and renewed attention again to, liberal general education. New interest has coincided with important intellectual developments in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences, provoking new thoughts about what should be central in higher education for undergraduates and also about how students learn. New interest has also coincided with momentous social and demographic changes among students at universities, and with our own recognition that we inhabit a new and more complex world – a post-Cold War, increasingly globalized, and multi-cultural world. New interest has also emerged from institutional concerns about the sprawling effects of past developments in general education, sometimes jogged by outside accreditation reviews. Finally, new interest in general education has coincided with

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<sup>1</sup> Clark Kerr, The Uses of the University, (1963,1995). Russell Jacoby, Dogmatic Wisdom (1994) suggests that liberal education has “vanished” entirely. For a useful statement on general education and academic specialization, see David Damrosch, We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University (1995), 108-132. Damrosch describes “an exhaustive and exhausting specialization,” in tension with general education.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Readings, The University in Ruins (1996); see also Stanley Katz, “Can Liberal Education Cope?” (Oct., 1997)

increasing public pressures on universities from outside for greater accountability in undergraduate education – from accrediting agencies to state governments and state and local boards of trustees<sup>3</sup> to concerned parents. The ‘culture wars,’ which have now mostly passed in my view, although traces linger in some states, have focused, in part, on liberal general education, and have been about the appropriate purpose, content, and organization of general education. Should students be educated to mastery in their own (Western) tradition or to critical appraisal of that tradition and appreciation for multi-culturalism and global diversity? New enthusiasms for citizenship, values, and community service also have focused on general education, as have renewed interest in cultivating writing and speaking skills.

What do people think about when they discuss general education? They generally mean becoming broadly educated (beyond the high school level), beginning to develop intellectual and moral imagination, becoming acquainted with the ways of knowing characteristic of activities in the university, and increasing capacities to think critically and independently. They think about preparing for upper level work in the disciplines, and about developing capacities useful more generally to human life and freedom, independent learning and citizenship. Broadly educated students, people expect, listen and hear, read and understand, are able to communicate clearly, persuasively, and movingly in writing or in speech.<sup>4</sup> They are capable at solving problems and they know things about other times and places and other cultures. They practice empathy and tolerance – Martha Nussbaum in a creative reply to Alan Bloom has advocated that students learn to “cultivate their humanity.”<sup>5</sup> They also see connections between making sense of the world and acting in it creatively and freely. Generally educated students comprehend something about the rules of the natural world and the achievements and practices of scientific inquiry.<sup>6</sup> They can also locate themselves in time and space in a larger narrative or narratives of society and culture.

### Models of Liberal General Education

In the modern university, liberal general education has tended to be institutionalized in one or two different general models -- the “fluid model” and the “core model.” The fluid model usually takes the form of the distribution requirement or set of requirements. It is assumed that liberal general education occurs as students pursue a set of university requirements, dipping their toes in different pools of mostly introductory level disciplinary based learning and inquiry.

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Levine, President of Columbia Teachers’ College, has worried in commenting on some of these cases that boards of trustees without curricular expertise threaten to usurp faculty functions and violate academic freedom

<sup>4</sup> William Cronin, “Only Connect: The Goals of a Liberal Education,” *American Scholar* (Autumn, 1998): 73-80.

<sup>5</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997). See also Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), to which Nussbaum replies..

<sup>6</sup> James O. Freedman, “Science and Liberal learning,” in *Idealism and Liberal Education* (1996), 77-81.



Students integrate general learning as they go. Indeed, the burden is mainly on the students to integrate their learning as they move among the pools, for the curriculum tends not to do it for them. The core model, in contrast, normally assumes the form of a pre-designed required course or sequence of courses and is often, although not always, concerned to expose students to a specific tradition or content. Core models are more directed and purposive than distribution systems, but some -- less burdened by emphasis on a specific tradition or content -- can approximate a middle ground, offering delimited menus of course choices. In the same way, some distribution systems, with clear purposes and relatively delimited course choices, can similarly occupy a middle ground. Whatever the model -- a core like Columbia College, a core distribution like Harvard, or a distribution like Michigan or Ohio State -- the hope and expectation is that encounter with such courses and experiences will breed among students trans-disciplinary intellectual values and perspectives (even if taking disciplinary courses), critical thinking abilities, broad knowledge and learning, and a range of capacities useful to leading free, independent, human lives and achieving enhanced success in additional specialized study.

There are costs associated with each model. The distribution model fits best and easiest with the way the modern university is organized, with its specialized disciplinary research interests. It is easiest to organize and obtain faculty and department approval and participation. A cafeteria of choices also fits with general student culture. But the distribution system also flirts with incoherence and lack of focus, and it affirms the specialist's approaches to knowledge rather than the generalist's. Emphasis is not on how different ways of thinking and seeing address real world problems but on building basic competency *ad seriatim* in single ways of thinking, course by course. Administratively, it is also difficult to predict the flow of student interests in the fluid model, so models of this kind normally run with high inefficiencies. Moreover, the whole system is tied together by advising, a weak link at best in the modern university. Often the requirements are too complex, the choices too wide, the advising too undeveloped, for the system to work well.

The core model, on the other hand, has its own difficulties as well. It is difficult in the specialized disciplinary-based modern university to get intellectual agreement on a core and its content or to overcome the logistical problems to mounting it. It is also difficult to mobilize faculty participation if the core stands outside departmental structures and arrangements or enrollments can't be made to count for departments. The steady drift in classic core programs is for tenured faculty specialists to stay clear. Tensions also exist between faculty making specialized contributions to their fields and faculty engaged in general teaching on different principles in the core. Limits on student choice -- the requirement of a prescribed course or courses -- also runs against the culture of choice. Perhaps the greatest difficulties are associated

with efforts to turn back the clock to focus on Western civilization or the American nation. Recent scholarship has challenged the suppressive unities of traditional core curricula like Western civilization or American civilization, and recently trained scholars are unprepared and unwilling to teach what boards of trustees or presidents or influential alumni may remember as models of general education from the distant past.

My own sense is that, practically speaking, choosing models matters less than finding out what works on individual campuses – and delivering what is possible in the best fashion. Here I agree with a recent Final Faculty Report of The Special Committee on General Education at Pennsylvania State University (1997), whose members argued that general education tends to be “idiosyncratic, tailored to particular institutions and their needs.” While distribution systems run risks of failing to promote coherence or to underwrite integration and general learning, even they can be made to work well with agreed-upon commitment to common purposes and principles, mechanisms of appropriate administrative and faculty oversight and review, and strong advising and budgetary support. On the other hand, at MSU, we have been experimenting since 1989 with an integrative studies (core) program during the past ten years. Our materials promote that we offer to students a “sense of the inter-relatedness of knowledge” and help them become familiar with multiple modes of inquiry. We think this is the right way to go for us and we are committed against having a distribution system. Yet it is also true that we sometimes take what we are able to get in the form of courses from faculty and departments, so that our integrative core has evolved toward a controlled menu or mixed core and distribution system. It is also not always clear that faculty and advisers know what integrative studies is or what our key goals and objectives are in terms of student learning. The real challenge of any model is finding ways to do it well – and, in institutions like ours, do it well on a large scale. Matters of large scale impose an additional set of challenges. Doing liberal general education well depends on establishing clear goals and purposes, figuring out how to mobilize, honor, and reward faculty to take general education seriously, focusing on students and learning, and building into the process mechanisms for continuous review, assessment, and improvement. Doing it well also means pressing always, hat in hand, for more resources.

MSU stands out among CIC and Big Ten institutions in what it does in general education. Elsewhere, the distribution system prevails uniformly. In one CIC institution, every course in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is countable toward requirements in the distribution system. At MSU, since a Committee to Review Undergraduate Education (CRUE) Report in 1989, liberal general education has been organized in a core integrative studies program, spread among three core colleges – Arts and Letters, Natural Science, and Social Science. Three Centers for



Integrative Studies – one each in the arts and humanities, the biological and physical sciences, and the social and behavioral sciences -- stand in place of what historically was a lower division college, University College, that provided general education at MSU with its own faculty. The three centers organize and administer the curriculum, recruiting and drawing on faculty from the disciplinary departments. Such faculty participate in the full range of higher educational endeavors, including research and creative activities, but also assume responsibility to offer an “integrative:” general education curriculum distinct from regular departmental offerings. Students entering MSU are required to take a semester course of American Thought and Language, MSU’s Tier I writing course (4 credits), as well as additional Tier II writing in their majors. Students are also required to take six semester courses (24 credits) in Integrative Studies – 8 credits each in the Arts and Humanities, Sciences, and Social Sciences. An additional course, a Trans-Collegiate Integrative Studies course at the upper level, was tried for a time but could not successfully be created in large enough numbers to handle the enrollment, and has been dropped.

#### Integrative Studies at MSU

At MSU, each student must complete two semester courses (8 credits) in each of three broad knowledge areas – arts and humanities (IAH), biological and physical sciences (ISB/ISP), and social and behavioral sciences (ISS). The emphasis is on integrative, interdisciplinary teaching and courses, and on the broad task of introducing students to the distinctive subject matter and the interpretive and scientific modes of knowing associated with the knowledge areas. Courses are taught in large sections in two areas, the sciences and social sciences. Courses are taught in smaller sizes or broken out in smaller sections in the third area, arts and humanities, drawing on larger numbers of faculty and teaching assistants, and involving more active learning strategies and greater emphasis on significant writing.

In Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities (IAH), all students are required to take a single gateway course, IAH 201: The United States and the World. This course focuses on the making and remaking of the American nation, which is conceived as an unfinished nation, and on the enduring tensions and contested arguments that are central to American civilization. IAH 201 explores America as a civic community rooted in the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and also as a social community rooted in the history of voluntary and involuntary migration and resultant intermingling and clash of groups. It examines America as a culture and also a set of cultures, and it explores America as a nation in a world of nations and peoples, entangled ever increasingly with the world. It focuses on competing civic and ascriptive traditions in American life and on issues of moral mission and intervention in American

experience. The course is led and revised periodically by a faculty group and actually delivered by fifty mentored teaching assistants. All students also take an additional IAH course from a large menu of courses, including courses on various regions of the world, on great ages, on a range of themes, like moral values and the arts and humanities, or language and society, and on the fine or creative arts. Faculty lead these second IAH courses, offering proposals to a faculty advisory committee, and also reporting on how the course went annually. Faculty are assisted in these courses by teaching assistants. Students write at least three to five papers in two IAH courses and usually have opportunities to make varied public presentations.

In Integrative Studies in the Sciences (ISB/ISP), all students are required to take on ISB course and one ISP course plus one recitation/lab. Emphasis is on introducing students to the methods of science and to awareness of the value and importance of science in knowing the natural world. The conception is that ISS courses are about emphasizing the importance of science for students who will not study science but will be active citizens. Students who take science-heavy curricula generally bypass these courses, which are taught in large venues mostly with machine-scored exams but also include new experiences with active learning and in-class writing.

Finally, in Integrative Studies in the Social Sciences (ISS), all students are required to take two ISS courses, one 200 level and one 300 level. Courses are organized around themes – society and the individual, inequality, power and authority, urban systems, war and revolution, national diversity – and also around focus on several regions of the globe. MSU has a strong tradition of area studies, and this local strength in faculty resources is reflected in both the IAH and ISS curricula. It is one reality on which general education must build. Emphasis in ISS courses is on introducing students to the broad preoccupations of the social sciences and to social science methods, concepts, and thinking. ISS courses are also taught in large venues with machine-scored exams, but also with essay exams and papers.

MSU's system approaches something of a mixed core and distribution model, combining a single prescribed course with limited menus of courses. It incorporates choices for students while avoiding the extended cafeteria of choices that characterize some distribution systems. Center directors with advisory committees oversee the process of proposing new and adding on courses, so some administrative coherence and direction is assured. On the other hand, because the three centers operate independently in three separate colleges, integration is limited largely to college by college approaches.



### Challenges at MSU

Among the challenges that we confront at MSU in providing our own local model of liberal general education, the first is the challenge of “integrating integrative studies,” that is, overcoming barriers inherent in the institutional structure of three core colleges in a modern university. Because the integrative studies program has been built in three centers in three core colleges, each with its own history and culture, integration mostly occurs within, not across, the centers and colleges. Integrative studies is institutionally segmented in three parts. This makes it difficult to conceive or offer courses that cross the college boundaries – courses that might be created, for instance, on language, cognition, and the brain, or on ethics and biogenetics, or on creativity in science and art. In addition, because faculty homes and rewards are in the departments and colleges, it is also a challenge to create and sustain a community of interaction among integrative studies faculty – to sponsor conversations on teaching, sharing of best practices, and exploring of mutual problems. In the past two years, center directors have lobbied successfully with the Provost and core college deans to support an Integrative Studies Institute, offering funding to sponsor conversations, sharing of best practices, and faculty development.

Another important challenge is attracting faculty academic specialists to teach in integrative studies and, if successful, encouraging them to teach truly integrative, interdisciplinary courses. Attracting faculty means successfully overcoming barriers to faculty or department assignments and also overcoming competing demands on valuable faculty time. Trading student credit hours, offering teaching assistantships, and mobilizing support from the dean generally work to obtain sufficient faculty assignments to mount the curriculum annually, although we are currently conducting a study to discern what proportion of faculty teaching assignments are devoted to general education. However, attracting faculty is an ongoing challenge – including attracting new faculty, who are sometimes hidden away from general education until tenure has been achieved. This is a real problem and results in socialization away from participation in general education, despite template lines in original letters of offer. Moreover, this is merely part of the challenge. Therechallenge also consists of the need to encourage faculty recruited to teach Integrative Studies to teach integratively – i.e., to teach differently from teaching in the disciplinary department, and with an eye to interdisciplinarity and multiple ways of knowing. Integrative studies general education requires teaching of a different kind. And this too is challenging to faculty who face faculty development issues in their efforts at interdisciplinarity as well as critical responses from other academic specialists to their efforts at incorporating their colleague’s disciplines.

A third challenge involves advocating on behalf of integrative studies in the face of student disinterest in liberal general education and the general commitment of the entire institution to specialization. We must overcome barriers to the mobilization of student as well as faculty interest in integrative studies courses (most students think of these as required courses to be gotten out of the way). We must explain and advocate to students and their parents, advisors, and faculty colleagues in and outside the core colleges why liberal general education is important, and why and how integrative studies courses offer value added to student learning.

A fourth challenge involves sustaining and improving a curriculum that produces faculty satisfaction and real student learning. We are at the beginning stages of transforming our attention from focus primarily on faculty inputs and efforts, including attention to course proposals and course design, to focus in addition on student learning outcomes in courses. We are just beginning to plan to institutionalize program-based and course-embedded assessment, feedback, and systematic improvement in teaching and learning. In the absence of systematic assessment of outcomes, we nonetheless pay a good deal of attention to course review and evaluation and to student satisfaction. In a recent CIC gathering, we learned to our delight that it was novel to have ongoing advisory committees in general education that meet regularly, review course proposals and short reports, and appraise the state of liberal general education.

Finally, a fifth challenge is class size – our classes are too large to underwrite truly active and interactive learning or to assign significant writing. The student/faculty ratio is too high, the numbers of teaching assistants too low, and the budgetary support is insufficient. Integrative studies serves as a cash cow for the core colleges.

#### Current Preoccupations

Despite these challenges, we continue to get better at what we do each year and to generate student satisfaction scores that improve annually as well. Unlike some institutions, we are under no pressures to adapt a traditional core curriculum, although our President has criticized IAH 201: The U.S. and the World (privately) for failing sufficiently to emphasize the virtues of entrepreneurship in the American experience or to celebrate sufficiently American triumph in the Cold War. The President and Provost have spoken now and again also of a “great books” option that simply cannot and will not be fielded at the university. Faculty would not find it compelling. We do not face any groundswell of interest at MSU either toward adopting a distribution model, although some departments and faculty have toyed with the idea from time to time, and some professional schools have wondered if they could list courses in the menu as well. Pockets of



faculty continue to resist the idea of “integrative studies,” believing in a principled way that integration should be an upper level activity following up early disciplinary-based learning.

Our current preoccupations hence are not with fending off outside interference or combating internal opposition. Rather they are with trying to summon our internal resources to strengthen the menu of choices and courses offered, improve student learning and student understanding of the key purposes of general education, and strengthen faculty and student satisfaction. Hence, we are currently committed to eliminating the one course, one size fits all approach in IAH, elaborating some alternative courses to go with The U.S. and the World, including Europe and the World, and several other courses. We are elaborating a short menu of regional-based courses and also of thematic courses. This will permit more faculty to contribute to teaching in IAH in the gateway course, and it will also open up choices for students, increasing overall satisfaction. We are also working to stir conversations among faculty in integrative studies concerning best practices and to sponsor new course innovation and faculty development. We are trying to raise the respect accorded to general education teaching by offering fellowships for course development and innovation and awards for excellent teaching. Finally, we are also working on institutionalizing assessment, including applying for major outside grant support to assist us; and we are working on advocacy and improved communication with students, advisors, chairs, and faculty. We think we’re making modest progress at MSU and that liberal general education, at least in this one modern university, isn’t in retreat at all.