

Musings on General Education

KATHRYN CORBETT, *Faculty Emeritus*

I suppose I should establish my credentials. I served on a College Committee on General Education which met for three years during the 1950s. During the 28 years when I held a faculty appointment, I taught General Education classes and I worked with students on meeting the requirements. That, combined with the ever-present discussion of the subject with colleagues and students leaves me with personal, defined concepts on the nature of general education. Like the subject itself, my definitions are not precise, but do approach objectives of my desires for the student in such a fashion as to be translatable into academic fare. At least I could live and function with them.

The lengthy committee service was one of the major growth areas of my professional career. The committee met once a week for three years and included persons from academic disciplines throughout the school. The survivors who presented the final report became so melded in their opinions and grew so much in their tolerance of diversity that we committed the unpardonable; we outgrew our constituency. One of my learnings from that committee was, "The fruits of your labors amount to naught when the polity doesn't know what you are talking about." I used to bore my colleagues in later years by my insistence upon interim reports, hearings, reporting on campus committees or projects, etc. My actions were based on past experience. I learned the hard way to keep the constituency informed.

The basic concept which emerged was the idea that general education is a separate area of education. When you adopt that tenet, the introductory course, the rarified course of great interest to the individual professor, the course designed to service the major, the assignment of new professors who have only graduate notes at hand, or the professor who "can't teach graduate students" leads to disaster for the student. Besides, such practices are not general education. Neither is the course which students demand in response to their contemporary

interests or the course which the department wants to maintain by designating it "general education."

The concept of general education as a separate area of education for the student is difficult for the professor to grasp. Part of the reason lies in the specialization inherent in academe, e.g., if I didn't think Sociology was "the discipline," I wouldn't have studied it. Another is more personal. Most of us approach subjectively, from our own experience, or if we are more mellow, from *our* alma mater's program. "Look at me; I'm pretty good. I'm a Professor. I'm well educated. I am. Use my model." Few beginners approach with any other attitude. I learned through the years that there was some hope for growth only if you persisted with a colleague long enough to get him/her over the self-adulation hurdle.

To me, general education is a separate area of the student's total education program. I well remember when the concept came to me. It congealed with a book, the one I still think is the best on the subject (must be—converted me), a Harvard Study, *General Education in a Free Society*.¹ Our committee had, over the course of three years, established a bookshelf in the library and we read the books. Time was on our side. I also recall a conversation with the late Harry Griffith (for whom the Ed-Psych Building was named). When on our way to one meeting, he mentioned that he had just had a great delight; he had seen the idea "come" to a colleague, who up to this time had led the forces for the introductory course. "Nothing to general education. Just let them pick any introductory course not in their major." This oft-quoted statement was now left behind in the committee.

Why is it a separate educational pattern? This is best approached by defining the total goal for the student. To me, the academic program has three components: major preparation for a vocation; electives for individuality; and general education for commonality for all educated humans—in this case, the holders of the baccalaureate degree. In

the latter goal lie the objectives of general education.

My objectives for general education are simplistic. From my experience, the very nature of the area makes it undefinable in precise terms. The major can and should be denoted by specificity of desired outcome; the elective area has goals known only to the individual student—hopefully the student has some. Objectives for general education, on the other hand, are soft and all-encompassing. Terms like literate, educated, knowledge of the nature of human kind, communications skills, etc., all fall into the general education bin. Even the “*et cetera*” seems reasonable to avoid the delineated list. I acknowledge my academic puerility and proceed from that point.

The first objective I want for the student is knowledge of our human heritage in the humanities. This includes the social sciences, the arts, and a deepened understanding of the contemporary culture. My focus would have an American centering, not because I want only chauvinistic graduates but because some selection must be made. Next, I would wish for each holder of the baccalaureate to attain literacy in English. The case for foreign languages leaves me non-plussed when evaluated against erudition in the language of the country in which the student lives. Another desired objective is skill in communication, both written and oral. I also would add here two other languages of our times which educated persons need to function: accounting language and computer fluency. Another objective I have sounds like flag waving, and it is. I want college graduates to be knowledgeable in and participatory in American polity. Yes, I do mean competent citizenship as a valid objective. Essential to well-being and the future is a defined objective of conceptualization of the scientific world in which we live. The scientific method, problem solving and scientific literacy cluster here. The last is the most difficult of all to pin down—personal growth and the development of the individual to enable survival physically, emotionally and spiritually in the world which exists outside our ivied walls. The overlay dream I have is for the quest for learning to have become ingrained for life which going through the process for general education. These objectives all rest on commonality of humans, while both the major and electives for individuality are pinioned to specificity. Thus the existence of the separate area of general education.

I have served my time with the detractors whose

approach was to laugh at my grandiose terms and demand precision in such terms as citizenship. I think these concepts can be defined more closely than I have done in these musings, but their definition lies more in the common consciousness which we all share than in the hallowed measurements so beloved by science. I think most of us have an idea of what we mean by citizenship, knowledge of human heritage, literacy in English, etc., and, with discussion, we can reach some agreement, even among faculty. Thus I am assuming that we have progressed beyond the blockage of exact precision in objectives and have come into some pattern of what we want. I also think faculty agreement can be reached on how much reasonable academic time is available. After all, the general education arena is only one part of the student's total academic program.

How to achieve the desired objectives leads to the greatest wrestle of all. Do you design a course with the aims; do you design professors to meet the aims; or do you give up and just let the chips fall where they may? The latter is sometimes disguised as meeting individual needs of students when it is more apt to be the opposite—meeting individual needs of professors. Courses designed specifically for general education can and do rescue the non-majors, but because they are taught by professors who got to be professors by learning more and more about less, they tend to be the worst of all in reflecting professorial bias, which shines forth in the arbitrary selection of course content. The most valid complaint is that they give the students no sense of depth, and tend to be the epitome of “once over lightly, just don't muddy the waters.”

My personal bias comes into play when I meet up with a colleague who blithely informs me that he/she can teach a course which integrates human experience—in a four unit course, naturally—meeting twice a week for a ten-week quarter. Just a little humility would have eased my pain so many times. At the other end of the spectrum lies the devout academician who announces that the subject demands at least an entire year of study—under his/her tutelage, of course—and really needs a four-year program. I well remember arriving at the English Department intellectually exhausted from the fray of winning the battle for *one* required course in literature for all Humboldt State College graduates, and having the entire English Department, collectively and individually, berate me in one, two and three syllable words (one even used allegorical repartee) because I had

emerged with only *one* four-unit semester course; the bare minimum, as far as they could see, was at least one year, with 10-12 units. I felt like Joan of Arc, looking for the nearest stake.

General education is built upon compromise. That is the only viable approach for meeting student, faculty and institutional needs. Some faculty do design general education courses to meet the objectives. Some student choices can be part of the program. Occasionally, but rarely, an existing course can be used. Out of it all, our students seem to survive in spite of us. Some even graduate educated.

The compromise rests upon continual discussion. For the faculty, as for the student, it's the process which matters. The enemy of general education is complacency. The glory of it is growth for all who truly participate—both faculty and student.

The faculty discussion, the grist of the mill, needs guidelines. As this paper emanates from one on the sidelines, let me advise on ground rules which would save hours of time, although it might leave some faculty speechless while they regrouped. The primary gauge should be the finished product, the graduate. With this in mind, three basics. One, an overall limitation of the numbers of units for general education in the degree pattern should be set to establish parameters. Two, no participant in the discussion is allowed to mention what general education he/she had, what his/her alma mater requires, what any spouse or live-in thinks, what courses he/she insisted upon offspring taking, or what he/she teaches in classes. I realize this will be a blow to faculty egos, as the finished products are superb examples of liberal education, but the pain of omitting such personal strokes will soon be overcome by excision of much of the dross which clutters thought. Third, no reference in the proposals shall mention money, department needs, the Chancellor's Office or institutional restrictions, real or imagined. This sounds like the program will result in a dream world, but when the dream is defined, then the available resources can be utilized. Give everyone a break by starting with the concepts and then adapting to the restraints, rather than vice-versa.

Now we have progressed to the unanswerable and hoary—perhaps better termed “hairy”—part: evaluation. So far no one I know of has solved this one, because the evaluation of such soft dreams for students is dependent upon what the student becomes after leaving the institution. As I am indulging in musing, I propose that two studies be made—one of the graduates who have been gone for five years and one of the graduates of over ten years. Such evaluations should be formulated by the faculty who proposed the plan under which the student matriculated and at the time of adoption. Hand in the evaluation forms with the requirements. Then use them five and ten years later. It also seems advisable that evaluations be based on the positives—not on the outrages or pent-up wrath. One of my learnings over the years has been that I can evaluate just as well on what the students think is important and knows (with its subsequent omissions) as to focus on problem areas. Meaningful evaluations of the general education program could be done from this aspect. Evaluations do not exist to release wrath; they exist to determine the outcomes, which with human behavior usually go much farther when within the spectrum of positive developments.

I have now mused down the road which admittedly is a circle tour. By the time you finish, you should start again. I have conceptualized general education as an area; I have defined objectives; I have outlined process; and I have dreamed an evaluation. Faith, hope and charity, and the greatest of these is charity. And that is my final musing. The greatest gain for me was tolerance and humility. I have learned my way was not the only way. My colleagues had other paths to gain the same objectives. Who knows? Perhaps they were closer to the track than I. I touched their lives and they touched mine. The journey was general education. For the student I can only hope likewise.

NOTES

¹*General Education in a Free Society*. Harvard University Press, 1945. Report of the Harvard Committee.