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Taking Up the Liberal Studies Challenge

Bruce Henderson's reflections on General Education highlight the important and challenging possibilities of the new Liberal Studies Program. But I don't think the questions he raises can be answered without first answering a more fundamental question: just what exactly do we expect our General Education curriculum to accomplish?

Let me offer my answer: General Education courses should give students the tools to become more informed about, and to analyze, any problem which may confront them throughout their lives. General Education should help create students and citizens who challenge their own assumptions and the assumptions of others, citizens who ask questions about the world around them and seek answers, students and citizens who can think critically. In the current business vernacular, we should be encouraging students to "think outside the box." This doesn't sound too controversial until you consider what I'm leaving out: the more traditional view that General Education courses are about transmitting information, about inculcating (in my department's case) a knowledge of past history. I believe that transmitting information should be no more than a secondary concern, at best.

Why do students think many of our current General Education courses are just an extension of high school? Precisely because unfocused surveys often replicate the kind of vague generalities and memorization of information most of them got before coming here. Many of the current General Education offerings are like "Introductory Survey Lite," taking an already broad survey course designed for new majors and watering it down even further. As Bruce rightly notes, we can get caught up in trying to convey glimpses of the broad spectrum of knowledge that we ourselves have so laboriously assimilated over a long career of graduate school and research. Another factor in the watering down process can be our own low expectations of non-majors, who are "forced" into taking courses they don't like, leading us to "dumb down" material already general and often vague. The same expectations often lead us towards traditional teaching styles that can reinforce memorization over analysis. What's the point of having small classes if we're going to teach and test 30 students the same way we'd teach and test 300?

When I teach History 105 (Western Civilization), I care less about whether a year from now my students remember who succeeded Henry VIII or who won the battle of the Somme or what John Stuart Mill said about the subjection of women than I do about the students' ability to formulate coherent arguments or to think critically and ask questions about the world around them. They may not remember all those historical details, but if I give them the tools to find information and to understand it, to fit information into a wider context and to think about it critically, then I will have succeeded in giving them a real education. General Education courses in all departments should not be about the memorization of information but about the synthesis of information and about deep understanding.

This is not a simple process, nor is it one that students necessarily like. It is much safer to be content in one's own preconceptions about the world. We do not like our assumptions of the

world challenged, assumptions upon which we base our actions and interactions with others. Challenging students to recognize and think about their own assumptions is hard work. Similarly, breaking patterns of learning (rote memorization and "multiple guess" testing) that have been established through the primary and secondary schools is difficult and labor-intensive for both student and teacher. Accordingly, not all students will always like General Education courses (as I conceive them, anyway). Therefore, I think Bruce is absolutely right to challenge us to think about the possibilities offered by the new Liberal Studies program.

The new Liberal Studies Program will require students to take "Perspectives" courses, both as freshmen and at the upper level. We should NOT respond with warmed-over surveys. Instead, we must take up the opportunity provided by Liberal Studies to develop specifically focused courses on special topics, courses organized around consistent and coherent themes. These kinds of courses will encourage in-depth examination of specific issues, fostering the type of critical thinking that leads to active, informed citizens and more successful careers. These courses would also address the issue of holding student interest more than our current General Education courses seem to do by allowing more in-depth consideration of disciplinary issues and addressing issues of contemporary concern to students. As a great example of this focused approach, I would point to the interdisciplinary collaboration of Cynthia Atterholt and Scott Philyaw, who are planning to teach two "linked" General Education courses in Chemistry and History, using the link of the environment to pull together two disciplines not normally associated with each other.

Finally, the administration also faces a challenge. If faculty members are to take Liberal Studies seriously, the administration must cut the redtape that currently stymies innovation. It must streamline the new course approval process so that it doesn't take inordinate amounts of work and time to introduce these new courses; innovative approaches like interdisciplinary courses must be made easier to initiate. Without a corresponding commitment from the administration, the new Liberal Studies program will not differ much from the previous curriculum.

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