



Faculty Forum

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A Plea for New Attitudes about General Education

The other day, I was talking to a friend and WCU grad who has two sons in college. One has been here at Western for a couple of years. My friend has told me several times that her son who is here has struggled staying focused on his studies because he was "just" taking general education courses. Her younger son has started attending a community college this semester. I asked my friend how her son liked going to the community college. She said, "he loves it—he went right into what he was interested in; he didn't have to take any general education courses."

Is this an inescapable fact of life? Are general education courses inevitably the overcooked vegetables of the intellectual meal? Is it the case that most students are going to have to hang in there with the general education courses because they are good for them? As some parents say to their children about eating their vegetables, do we have to say about general education courses: "You don't have to like them, you just have to eat them"?

The fundamental problem in any university's general education program is that most students do not like to take general education courses and many faculty members don't like to teach them. Most of us who served on the General Education Review Committee (GERC) know that there is no magic general education curriculum structure that will ensure a fine educational experience for our students. Throughout the planning process we knew that the quality of the general education experience is going to be largely a function of the quality with which we execute whatever program we have. If we are to make the Liberal Studies program work, the key will be to find ways to teach courses that are interesting to take and interesting to teach.

In the new program, faculty members have a great deal of control in designing or redesigning freshman seminars, foundations and perspectives courses, and upper-level general education courses. The criteria for developing courses generally are much less prescriptive than those used when the existing courses were developed. We are entering an important period in the history of our curriculum. To those who are going to be involved in the development of Liberal Studies, I suggest we ask ourselves some hard questions about interest, challenge, and coverage.

How can we make our students more interested in Liberal Studies?

I assume that student and faculty motivation are the most important elements in developing a successful course. The central questions include: Is this course really, truly interesting to the non-specialist? Is this the very best, most exciting matter my discipline has to offer? Have I selectively identified the ideas that are most likely to intellectually engage my students and give them the tools for thinking about my material at the level of a well-educated college graduate? After taking my course, will most of my students be more interested in, or at least be more appreciative of my discipline? Are there ways to relate the material to students' lives?

These questions reflect that fact that whether or not students continue to learn about my subject matter after leaving my course is dependent more on their attitudes about the material than about

any specific information they acquired. I should not feel compelled to relate my subject to students' lives, but if I can, I certainly increase the likelihood that they will not only be interested but remember what we did.

Is my course challenging?

One of the most common criticisms the members of the GERC heard from students was that general education courses at WCU were often simply extensions of high school. The questions here are obvious, but perhaps not so easy to answer. Is my course rigorous? If it is, is it so because I am requiring thinking or because I am making students memorize complex, disconnected material? Am I making students read, write, and think at a college level--quantitatively and qualitatively? Am I setting the proper expectations for upper-level work? Is this going to be a course that a WCU faculty member who does not know the area would enjoy being in?

The questions about challenge are closely tied to those about interest. If there is too much challenge, students will quickly lose interest and give up. If there is not enough challenge, the course is unlikely to be interesting for either student or teacher. Insecure faculty members may worry about a rigorous course receiving bad evaluations, but a course that is both challenging and interesting is likely to be evaluated positively. Teachers must remain interested if the course is challenging because when teachers challenge students, they inevitably create work for themselves in the form of reading, grading and preparing. Providing challenge in liberal studies courses is about more than raising the bar. It is about changing the academic culture of our campus.

Is less (coverage) more (depth)?

A frequent barrier to the creation of courses that are interesting and optimally challenging is the concern faculty members have about covering "the material." What are the skills and attitudes that should be included in "the material" to be covered? Is learning to interact with other students as important as conveying information through a lecture? Should I sacrifice student interest in order to cover more information? Are there ways to cover the information outside the classroom? Have I provided students with the means, including time, to reflect on what is important? What are the chances of students remembering, a year later, material that has been presented through a lecture rather than through a demonstration, a discussion, or an exercise? Would a lecture be more effective if it went into more depth rather than superficially dealing with a broader range of material?

Many of the conflicts we encounter concerning coverage have their roots in the love we have for our own disciplines. We want to convey it all. Instead, we need to try hard to think back to those days when we were students and remember how slowly much of what is now our expertise was really acquired.

The opportunity to take a fresh approach to a general education program occurs only once every 20 years or so. Let's take this rare opportunity to ask ourselves some hard questions about the fundamental assumptions we make about teaching and learning. Let's take the opportunity to change the attitudes of students and faculty about getting liberal studies courses "out of the way."

Bruce Henderson, Psychology

The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.