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ABSTRACT

The emergence of vocational curricula each with specific proficiencies has led to a new concept of the major dominated by technical rather than liberal learning. Although this has occurred at both two- and four-year institutions, applied curricula tend to disadvantage two-year students more than than their four-year counterparts because of less attention devoted to general as compared to technical education. Open-door institutions like community colleges can rethink general education in specialized curricula in the following three ways: (1) improving distribution requirements to include more general education in career tracks while still complying with accreditation standards; (2) developing interdisciplinary courses to include communication and thinking skills in occupational-technical courses; and (3) extending general education values into applied coursework via writing-across-the-curriculum or including group work, class discussions, essay exams, out-of-classroom projects, and other active learning strategies in technical courses such as accounting or business. Community colleges can encourage a deeper engagement with the liberal arts and encourage greater attention to academic skills such as writing and problem-solving by requiring evidence of their orderly and incremental study in their career and professional programs. Contains 13 references. (BCY)

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by

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Paper presented at the 99th Meeting of the North Central Association Commission on Higher Education, Chicago, IL.

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In 1993, Change magazine published an article about accounting education with the header "change where you might least expect it" (Wyer, p. 12). The author, a director of one of the Big Six accounting firms, described how a discipline scarcely known for innovation had begun to move away from prescribed content-based credit hour curricular "lumps" (her word, not mine) towards new approaches that included "concern for critical thinking and interpersonal skills" (p. 14). Can accounting faculty really show us some ways to better harmonize general education in career and professional curricula?

Jim Palmer has provided some very important insights into the more problematic aspects of assessing outcomes in open-door, open-ended institutions from which most students do not earn a degree. By implication, he has asked if general education must therefore remain elusive at colleges with populations more fluid and curricula more fixed than those at more selective institutions. Or, can educators at open-door institutions like community colleges find more effective ways to naturalize general learning achievement, especially within career and professional curricula? Working from the assumption that they can, I will discuss some ways that we can work general education more deeply into the curriculum and surmount some of the difficulties inherent in open-access education. My discussion will include general education designs such as those promoted by the Accounting Education Change Commission that permeate the curriculum and lend themselves to assessment of general learning at any of several points up to and including graduation.

Programmatic Accreditation and General Education: Reflections of the Two Academic Cultures

The emergence of vocational curricula each with its own set of occupational proficiencies has lead to a new concept of the major in American higher education dominated by technical rather than liberal learning. At both two- and four-year institutions, the majority of open-admissions students enroll in career or professional programs which engage them more intensively with specialized than with general learning. However, applied curricula tend to disadvantage two-year even more than four-year students because of different degrees of attention paid to general as compared to technical education. For example, baccalaureate degree professional programs usually dedicate a minimum of 40 to 50 percent of coursework to the arts and sciences. Typically, however, associate degree career programs

dedicate only 25 to 33 percent of course work to general education at community colleges and even less than that at two-year technical institutes.

Less is not more in matters of general learning. A variety of critics from the public and private sector have called for attention to the general education inequity that vocational programs, especially those at the associate degree level, impose on their students. However, open access institutions like community colleges exist in the real world of the commuter campus where students often enter and leave at multiple points in the curriculum. To discuss realistic options constructively, we must first get beyond the discordant arguments so painfully familiar to chairs, deans, and other academic leaders coming from the two academic cultures of liberal and applied studies. One culture argues that the curriculum does not permit more attention to arts, letters, or science because accreditation demands so much in the way of the specialized coursework that gives major purpose to the program. The other culture insists that only those courses that traditionally have framed the substance and practice of thoughtful learning can educate students generally.

Three Ways of Rethinking General Education in Specialized Curricula

Open-door institutions like community colleges can rethink general education in at least three ways in courses of study that prepare people for employment, for transfer, and often for both. The first is through distribution requirements. The second is through interdisciplinary courses that bridge the vocational and the general. And the third is through extension of general learning values into applied coursework.

Improving Distribution Requirements. Let's dispense first with the position that accreditation requirements and strictures undermine the possibilities of increasing attention to general education in career tracks. Undoubtedly, vesting separate responsibilities for institutional and programmatic review in regional and specialized accrediting bodies complicates approaches to general education in vocational majors. Despite prevailing perceptions to the contrary, however, programmatic accreditation guidelines are rarely so prescriptive that they preclude greater attention to liberal learning in technical majors.

Historically, institutions of higher education have indicated that specialized education has had a depressing effect on general education in employment-oriented programs. In national surveys, two-year colleges conclude more often than four-year colleges that specialized accreditation's influence over curriculum hampers institutional attempts to review and revise general education goals, course distribution, and delivery modes (Messersmith and Medsker, 1969; Anderson, 1987). However, actual scrutiny of programmatic accreditation guidelines suggests that they in no way curb a college's ability to rethink general education in any number of ways, including increased credit-hour

commitment to the general education core. Although a few specialized accreditors may still mandate minimum distribution requirements in applied specialized courses, most prefer to list technical competencies (not courses) which institutions need only demonstrate that they have introduced into the curriculum in an organized fashion.

For example, while the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) still insists on a course distribution system, the National League for Nursing has changed a former requirement that 40 percent of the curriculum be dedicated to general education in favor of one that asks institution's merely to provide the rational for non-nursing courses consistent with the associate degree nursing program's philosophy and outcomes. In other words, the League leaves it open to the colleges to determine what portion of the curriculum will be dedicated to general education. And, despite prevailing perceptions to the contrary, accrediting bodies under the Committee on Allied Health Education and Accreditation (CAHEA) umbrella prescribe little in the way of specific coursework for either general or specialized components of the curriculum, except for the basic sciences, if that. Instead of distribution requirements at the course level, they speak primarily to the occupational competencies to be achieved within the framework of appropriately sequenced "units, modules, and/or courses;" "content areas;" or "subject areas (which do not necessarily imply individual courses)," to cite three specific examples drawn from the literature of the Joint Review Committees for Respiratory Therapy Education (p. IV-4, 1986), for Educational Programs in Nuclear Medicine Technology (1991, p. 9), and for the Ophthalmic Medical Assistant (1988, p. 3), respectively.

Programmatic accreditation obviously exerts its influence in ways besides written statements through an "array of power brokers" (Simmons, 1988, p. 62) such as agency spokespeaple and site evaluators. Nonetheless, most specialized accreditation guidelines exhibit considerable tolerance for how colleges can package technical competencies in ways that theoretically permit whatever credit hour allocation they deem necessary for arts, letters, and science instruction. Actual reading of accreditation policies and guidelines suggests strongly that, in the eyes of the accreditors, decisions about what is taught and where and how it is taught reside mainly within the institution. Academic chairs, deans, and vice-presidents can foster that discussion by becoming more conversant with accreditation documents. How accreditation guidelines are interpreted and who interprets them on campus is critical to assuring that employment-oriented programs reflect, endorse, and sustain an institution's general education philosophy and learning outcomes.

Developing Interdisciplinary Courses. In applied programs, most colleges have abandoned the traditional university model of humanistic education as a coherent intellectual experience. Community colleges, in particular, have replaced the idea of humanistic education as an end in itself with a conception of

general education defined in terms of derivative skills such as writing, speaking, and critical thinking. In American higher education, the reformulation of the liberal arts (and, to a lesser extent, the sciences) from intellectual and fundamental to pragmatic but peripheral has lessened the perceived necessity for their in-depth study. When surveyed about the optimal general education courses in applied programs, for example, employers often equate general to basic education. They tend to see the desired general learning skills for the workplace as the natural outcome of elementary courses in written and oral communications, mathematics, economics, or computer literacy as opposed to those like philosophy, history, and literature.

The assumption that the arts and sciences are good for students primarily because they help them to better think and express themselves poses several problems for those who seek a more cohesive and balanced education for the workplace. One problem is that putting the premium upon the practical effect of general education feeds the notion that the arts and sciences lack intrinsic value and therefore need not be studied in any organized fashion. Another problem is that conceiving of general education in terms of derivative practical skills ignores the extent to which intensive study of the more abstract contributes to a greater capacity for thoughtful application--in the arts, in the sciences, and in the technologies.

Reducing general education to communication and thinking outcomes also ignores the possibility that these fundamental skills can be taught through content other than that of the arts and sciences. This posture, in turn, relieves the occupational-technical teacher from any significant responsibility for reinforcing general education skills like writing in career subjects. In the end, differentiating general from applied education on the basis of separately acquired competencies creates an intellectual divide that deeply fragments the academic experience for both students and teachers.

Interdisciplinary courses can help provide a more unified vision of schooling that endows vocational programs with more of the virtues claimed historically for liberal study. Successful implementation models for interdisciplinary courses in career and professional programs do exist at two- and four-year institutions (for examples of the latter, see the work of the Professional Preparation Network explored in Armour and Fuhrmann, 1989). The publications of the Shared Vision Task Force of the National Council for Occupational Education and the Community College Humanities Association describe several different possibilities for integrating the humanities in career programs. These include developing hybrid courses combining humanities and occupational courses for which students receive humanities credit.

For example, Seminole Community College has created a course called Technology and Humanities for The 21st Century which it now requires or strongly recommends for associate degree programs such as Nursing, Engineering, Drafting, and Interior Design. The

course examines how technology interacts with culture in the modern world with connections to the past. In the section piloted by a Ford Asset group, automotive students looked at work, transportation, and the lure of the open road in 20th century music and poetry. They did term projects on icons of modern life such as the automobile and they wrote extensively on positive and negative effects of technology on American society exemplified by the history of the automobile.

Concerned about their unfocused "cafeteria" approach to the humanities, Kirkwood Community College secured a National Endowment for the Humanities grant for interdivisional faculty from career programs and liberal arts to create three interdisciplinary humanities courses on topics of special interest to career students. The courses are entitled Working in America, Technology and the Human Condition, and Living in the Information Age (Eisenberg and others, 1991). In Working in America, for example, students explore and analyze reactions and attitudes toward work through cultural documents from several different time periods and disciplinary perspectives. They also reflect upon attitudes towards work in other cultures, interpret symbolic expressions such as literature and art representing labor, and communicate orally and in writing about fundamental human experiences such as economic activity.

Franklin University is a private but open-access institution which serves first-generation students, the majority of whom transfer to us from other schools. Although Franklin has a strong historic business emphasis, the faculty as a whole agreed two years ago to set aside 12 credits in all baccalaureate majors for a sequential three-course interdisciplinary core called Intercultural Studies. The courses ask students to reflect systematically upon broad historic patterns of human behavior and interaction. Using evidence drawn from different forms of human expression such as literature, architecture, and music, students react orally and in writing to questions such how different world cultures have evolved and influenced each other over time and how and why they have survived or declined. They also examine how and why a given society at a specific point in time has chosen to apply or not apply an available technology and how and why it has distributed labor in the ways it has along lines of race, gender, and class. Students maintain a portfolio throughout the three-course sequence which includes their weekly journal entries, reaction papers, essay exams, and final projects. The portfolios can be reviewed and assessed by internal and external evaluators, prospective employers, and the students themselves for evidence of systematic intellectual engagement and maturation.

Extending General Education Values into Applied Coursework. The writing-across-the curriculum movement represents the most comprehensive approach to extending general education competencies into applied coursework. In addition to providing students with more opportunities to practice writing, it has the added virtue of naturalizing the writing experience within familiar practical contexts of immediate interest to vocational

students. Writing-across-the curriculum does not require that career and professional faculty teach writing but it does ask that they facilitate writing. Applied education faculty can facilitate writing by introducing more frequent opportunities for students to respond through shorter and longer pieces of graded and ungraded writing such as journal entries, logs, summaries, questions, reactions, reports, essay exams, and papers.

Writing can serve several purposes in the specialized course classroom. Writing helps people to learn, to think, and to analyze as well as to communicate. It is no wonder then that writing figures more prominently than ever before in the new accounting education curriculum endorsed by the Big Six firms. In this curriculum, the overriding objective is to prepare people for a lifetime of engagement with a changing field. The Accounting Education Change Commission, therefore, encourages educators to help students to "become accountants, not to be accountants at the time of entry to the profession" (Accounting Education Change Commission, 1990, p. 1).

The Commission has funded a series of projects at two- and four-year colleges that introduce teaching and assessment methods in the accounting classroom designed to expand, reinforce, and evaluate communication abilities, analytical capacities, and interpersonal skills. Mesa Community College has changed its introductory accounting to decrease emphasis on the procedural understanding of debits and credits and increase analyses of case studies that illustrate significant accounting and other business-related concepts. The University of Arizona has restructured its introductory sequence to emphasize the uses and limitations of accounting information. Both approaches make extensive use of group-work, class discussions, essay exams, out-of-classroom projects, and other active learning strategies that enhance communication and analytical abilities. In their Accounting Education Change Commission grant proposal, Kansas State University indicated that it would validate its new accounting curriculum by testing all six cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy in the area of accounting, by sampling and assessing student writing at the sophomore year and again near graduation, and by videotaping graduating accounting seniors to assess oral communication skills.

Open-access institutions like community colleges can encourage a deeper more complex engagement with the liberal arts and sciences by requiring evidence of their orderly and incremental study in their career and professional programs. But they can also encourage greater attention to academic skills and abilities such as writing and problem-solving by requiring and documenting their reinforcement and integration in technical as well as arts and science coursework. Like the institutions cited above, they can best do this by bridging the two cultures of general and technical studies through more coordinated attention to matters of general education.

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