General Education Reform: Unseen Opportunities

By **Amit Mrig**,

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CONTENTS

THE DRIVE TO REFORM GENERAL EDUCATION

A recent national survey conducted by Academic Impressions revealed a surprising and welcome finding that 80% of the more than 300 institutions surveyed have recently completed or are currently involved with reforming their general education programs.

For years, leaders across all types of institutions have been calling for reforms to general education to improve persistence and quality. Traditionally thought of and treated as core to the idea of educating the whole student, general education programs have become increasingly watered down with:

- Too many choices for students

- Unclear goals or outcomes

- No clear link to the distinct mission of the institution

The proliferation of courses that can meet general education requirements marks a missed opportunity to improve student persistence by offering a tightly structured and mission-driven core.

This also adds cost for the institution. As Lucie Lapovsky, past president of Mercy College, notes, "General education curricula with lots of choices tend to be inefficient because all of the seats in most of the classes are not filled."

The reasons for this situation are many—general education programs are infrequently reviewed, quality is defined only by internal standards, and faculty lobby to have courses included to ensure credit hours for their department.

So it's encouraging to us that institutions are looking to reform their curriculum—because if done the right way, there are numerous real and tangible benefits to be realized.

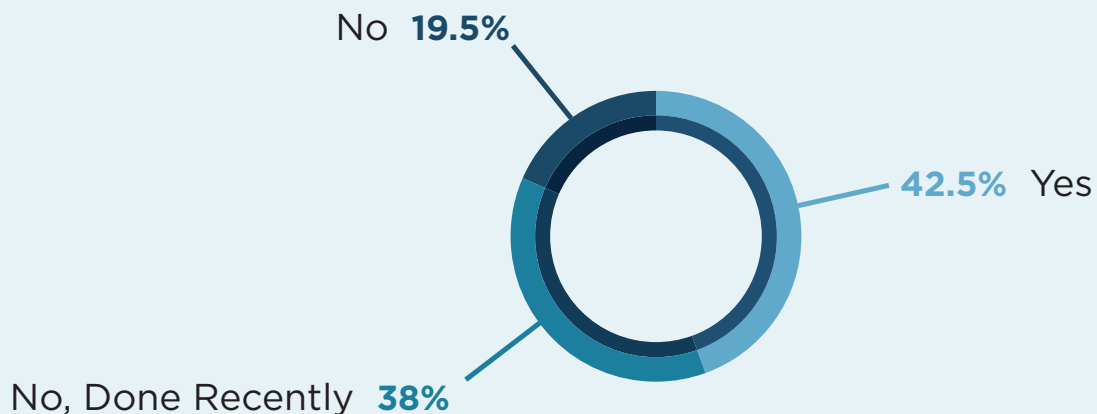**A CRITIQUE OF GENERAL EDUCATION**

Bob Dickeson, president emeritus of the University of Northern Colorado and author of *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services*, notes that there are often too many courses that satisfy gen-ed requirements, and those courses are often too narrow in scope, in effect providing a "cafeteria menu" of introductory courses to specific majors rather than a coherent program aimed at educating the whole student:

"A meandering, sloppy, ill-conceived smorgasbord of curricular stuff is not quality general education. It is neither purposeful nor coherent. By exploring various college catalogues and reviewing the general education requirements therein, one can see an astonishing range of choices—in some cases dozens or even scores of possible courses—that would meet a single general education sub-objective. If we were constructing a boat using such disparate timbers, it would sink for lack of integrity.

"Such an approach insults the student. 'In your major, we will give you breadth, depth, sequence, meaning, and cohesion. In your general education, by contrast, anything goes.'"
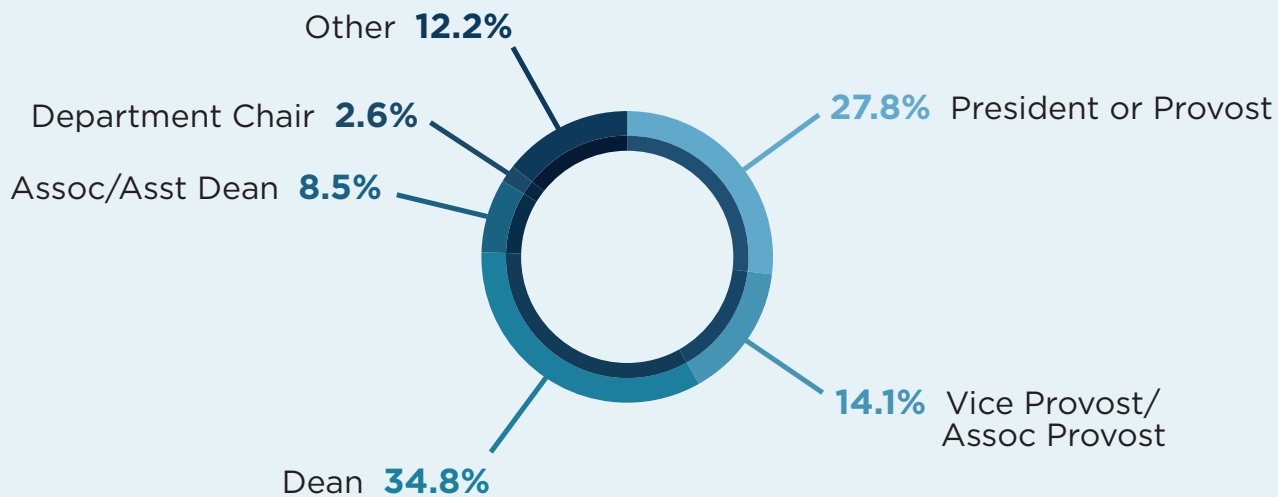
KEY FINDINGS FROM THE AI SURVEY

IS REFORMING GENERAL EDUCATION A PRIORITY ON YOUR CAMPUS IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS?

No **19.5%**
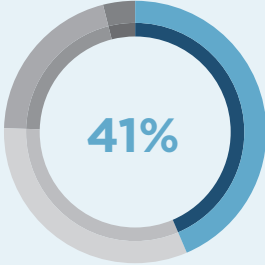
42.5% Yes

No, Done Recently **38%**

WHO TOOK OUR SURVEY?

308 total respondents

Other **12.2%**

Department Chair **2.6%**

Assoc/Asst Dean **8.5%**

27.8% President or Provost

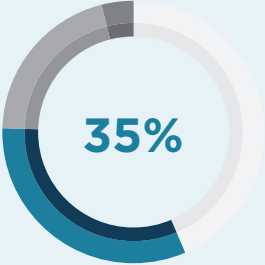**14.1%** Vice Provost/ Assoc Provost

Dean **34.8%**

A DIVERSITY OF INSTITUTIONS

125 Private Institutions

41%

108 Four-year Public

35%

60 Community Colleges

20%

14 Other

4%
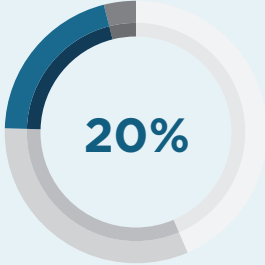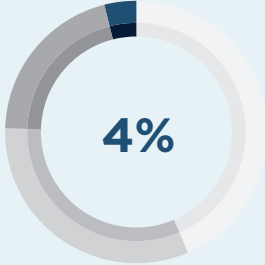
Enrolling under 5,000 full-time students

45%
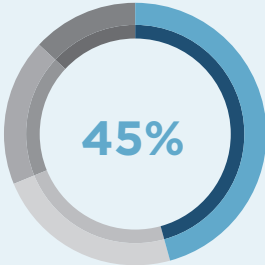
Enrolling between 5,000 and 10,000 full-time students

20%
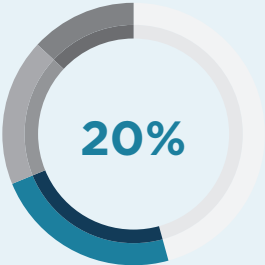
Enrolling between 10,000 and 25,000 full-time students

22%
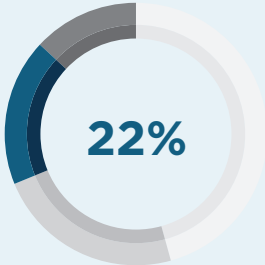
Enrolling more than 25,000 full-time students
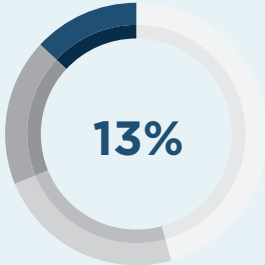
13%

CONFERENCE

REFORMING YOUR GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

January 29 - 31, 2014 :: Chicago, IL

Does your general education curriculum offer a structured pathway to completion?

http://www.academicimpressions.com/conference/reforming-your-general-education-curriculum

ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS

THE NEED FOR A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Unfortunately, as our research reveals, most institutions that are revamping their programs are taking too narrow an approach and are subsequently missing out on opportunities to position their institutions more competitively and ultimately better serve their mission.

Ideally, an institution would design and manage its general education curriculum in such a way as to achieve three key outcomes:

- Increased persistence and completion
- Competitive and financial advantages
- Improved quality and employability

PERSISTENCE AND COMPLETION

Of the 308 respondents to our survey, 238 shared their impetus for pursuing reforms. While respondents were allowed to share multiple reasons, a quick coding of the data shows that only 20% (or 48 institutions) were driven to improve persistence or completion goals. This percentage was the same at both two-year and four-year institutions. We think that institutions that do not have this as an explicit goal of reform are missing out on a significant opportunity.

Here's why.

Numerous studies demonstrate that performance in certain first year classes— primarily Mathematics and English— is a leading indicator of persistence and student success. Students who do not complete these classes or do not succeed in them are much more likely to drop out and not complete their college degree.

Additionally, multiple studies, such as *Cornerstones of Completion* and other reports from *Completion by Design*,[1] have demonstrated that tightly structured degree pathways encourage persistence and completion. Yet, few institutions, especially four-year institutions, offer such structured programs for general education requirements—most offer a wide menu of classes that can be accepted for credit. In fact, in our national survey, almost half of respondents self-reported a grade of C or below on how well their programs offer a tightly structured pathway to completion.

Against a backdrop of rising student debt, relatively flat graduation rates, and President Obama's call to action for more post-secondary education, higher ed leaders have major incentives to make persistence and completion a key outcome of reforms.

COMPETITIVE AND FINANCIAL ADVANTAGES

One of the interesting findings in our research is that campus officials have very little information regarding the financial impact of general education programs— either the costs to the institution or the impact on revenues. Allocating costs across disparate programs that share resources complicates matters, while campus politics make a focus on costs unpopular.

But there are two significant trends that should make managing costs a higher priority for all administrators.

First, higher ed's cost structure is unsustainable (see our report *The Other Higher Ed Bubble* for a review of the data[2]). This reality is well documented and the proliferation of general-ed courses, with uneven enrollments across individual offerings, only contributes to the cost disease in higher education.

> "There needs to be some discussion devoted to costs and investment. Are you able to demonstrate that the investments being made in the general education program are appropriate in light of available resources?"
>
> - Larry Goldstein,
> Campus Strategies LLC

Second, students have long been willing to choose the lowest cost providers to fulfill these requirements, threatening future enrollments and revenues. Traditionally two-year institutions have benefited from this trend, but their command of this market is increasingly at risk due to even lower-cost, online providers such as StraighterLine and Ed2Go.

In an era when enrollments are declining and students are increasingly favoring low-cost institutions (see Moody's 2013 Higher Education Outlook), institutions will have to work harder to maintain their position in the marketplace. To continue to attract students, higher-ed leaders will need to both:

- Create distinctive and value-added programs

- Minimize costs, passing those savings along to students

DECLINING ENROLLMENTS

In fact, in Academic Impressions' 2013 survey on enrollment declines, 47% of the 190 institutions that responded missed their enrollment targets last year—many by a significant percentage.[3]

Perhaps not surprisingly, almost no one (1%) in our survey or follow-up interviews mentioned cost or revenue as a key driver or outcome for reform. Yet, institutions acknowledge they have significant room for improvement in this area: approximately 30%, or 100 institutions in our survey, graded their cost management efforts a C or below.

QUALITY AND EMPLOYABILITY

According to *Academically Adrift* (2011), which examined a group of students who took the Collegiate Learning Assessment (an instrument that measures students' ability to think critically, reason, and communicate), 36% of students did not show any significant improvement in learning after four years of college. The students who did show improvement showed only modest gains. (Community colleges were not included in the sample.)

Combine these alarming findings with opinion polls that highlight the public's skepticism over the value of higher education. According to a TIME/Carnegie survey, 89% of US adults believe higher education is in crisis, and according to a report from the Pew Research Center, only 40% of consumers believe that higher education offers a "good" or "excellent" value for the money invested.

Given these findings, the imperative for institutions to improve quality—both real and perceived—cannot be overstated.

DEFINING QUALITY

When defining quality, we encourage institutions to explore the needs of the stakeholders they serve—students, parents, business, community, and government—and to focus on how these needs align with the mission of the institution. As Robert Zemsky, chair of the Learning Alliance for Higher Education, points out, the goals of being "mission centered and market smart" are not mutually exclusive. In fact, "the key to making the academy more publicly relevant and mission centered lies in making it, ironically, even more market sensitive."

What's more, survey after survey of employers consistently reveal that employers are not satisfied with the recent graduates they are hiring; they note a critical gap between the skills they need in new employees and the skills graduates have. Specifically, they cite gaps in communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork skills needed to succeed in the workplace.

In fact, in a recent employer survey by AAC&U,[5] nearly all those surveyed say that "a demonstrated capacity to think

TWO FOR ONE

Because persistence and completion are positively affected by good teaching practices (see Wabash College's national study [4]), institutions that invest in faculty development efforts should see a two-for-one return: improvements in both course-specific outcomes and student retention goals.

critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a candidate's] undergraduate major." [6]

Though many faculty, especially at private 4-year institutions, would argue that employability is not the goal of a strong liberal core, these "soft skills" are traditionally thought to be developed in large part through rigorous and coherent general education programs. At a time when unemployment and student debt are major concerns for students and families, why wouldn't institutions do more to link their liberal core with employer needs, addressing this "skills gap"? The skill sets that academe endeavors to produce are the same ones being demanded by employers.

EDUCATION VS. TRAINING:
AN UNHELPFUL DISTINCTION?

Rather than recognize why students are actually choosing to attend a particular institution, many in academe lament that students are pursuing college for the "wrong" reasons—and deflect criticisms about the value of their product.

According to the most recent CIRP Freshman Survey,[7] 88% of students go to college to get a good job. 75% attend to make more money. They are not coming in droves to pursue human development or to become a more global citizen, outcomes that are thought of as core to a liberal education and underlie the arguments of those who think the purpose of college is education, not training.

Yet, we feel strongly that academic leaders would do better to align their views of higher education's benefits with those of their students, rather than try and compete with them.

Producing students who are independent and critical thinkers is

not at odds with helping students get better jobs and earn more money. In fact 74% of employers stated in a recent survey[8] that they would recommend a 21st century liberal arts education to young people as a means of preparing them for today's economy.

LOOKING AHEAD

Through our survey of 308 institutions and our follow-up interviews with academic leaders whose institutions have recently completed a general education reform, Academic Impressions has gleaned a series of tips for ensuring that your review of the general education program sets up your institution—and its students—for success.

If institutions are to approach the reform of the core curriculum more holistically (and therefore more effectively), they will need to make certain critical decisions early in the process, involve stakeholders more inclusively, and be very alert to the typical "blind spots" that academic leaders tend to face when revisiting the general education program. The rest of this paper will explore this further.

A GENERAL EDUCATION SWOT ANALYSIS

In our view, the gradual erosion in quality and distinction of general education programs is one of the biggest threats to higher education. Based on AI's research and scan of hundreds of general education programs, this SWOT analysis captures current strengths and weaknesses, and highlights key opportunities for reform:

STRENGTHS

- Mission critical—core to the idea of educating the "whole student"

- Employers are demanding the skill sets that general education is able to provide—critical thinking, communication, problem solving, etc.

WEAKNESSES

- Too many institutions do not have clear goals or outcomes for what general education needs to achieve

- Programs often offer too many choices, creating confusion for students, limiting coherence and learning, and driving up costs for both the student and institution

- Courses often too narrow in scope, often consisting primarily of introductory courses to specific majors

- May prevent students from transferring in/out of institution

- Limited faculty buy-in due to unclear vision for the core; faculty who feel treated as "second-class citizens" when asked to deliver general education

THREATS

- Online education and other low cost providers

- Limited investment in quality programs threatens future enrollment as students question the value of the degree

OPPORTUNITIES

- Creating structured pathways to fulfill requirements supports persistence and completion goals

- Increasing enrollments through distinctive programs

- Meeting employer needs through better prepared graduates

- Mitigating questions about the value of the degree through measurable results

- Cost reduction

- Speed of economic change demands students who know how to learn, adapt, and engage with those from different backgrounds

TAKING THE RIGHT APPROACH

KEY DECISIONS TO MAKE

Here are the decisions that your institution will need to make early in a reform effort:

WHAT ARE THE KEY DRIVERS OF QUALITY?

What are the key drivers of quality, and what factors have the greatest impact on students' academic success? For example, how important are factors such as:

- Student/Faculty ratio and small class sizes

- Full-Time vs. contingent faculty

- Outcomes-Focused design of the curriculum

- Student cohorts learning together

- Interdisciplinary focus

- Integration of instructional technologies, new models for teaching and learning

You will need to have open conversations about which factors matter more and which matter less—and you'll need to call on faculty to examine sacred cows.

"Our president asked, 'What do students need to know to be successful in the 21st century?' That opened up a whole conversation. This question defines the Carolina Core. We didn't start by looking at the courses, we just asked a broad group of stakeholders the question, 'What do students need to know?' Then we relied on our faculty to translate what we discovered into learning outcomes."

- Michael Amiridis,
Provost, University of South Carolina

WHAT DOES THE CORE CURRICULUM MOST NEED TO ACHIEVE?

Traditionally, institutions have designed and organized the core to deliver introductory content across the disciplines. But this approach encourages "mission creep," with the addition, over time, of a wider menu of introductory courses. It also doesn't promote a sense of focus or clear outcomes.

We think it's critical that your committee open a broadly inclusive conversation to identify what skills your students need in order to graduate prepared for 21st century citizenship and employment in an evolving, global market. Clarity on those skills can then drive decisions about the curriculum and the appropriate content for it.

"Many people think of gen ed in terms of classes, classes that reside in different majors or disciplines. Students need to know that they are taking these courses in order to develop specific competencies— such as critical thinking, ethical and social responsibility—rather than to collect certain sets of knowledge. It's a departure from how students think about what they will be doing in college."

- Yves Labissiere,
Interim Director of University Studies,
Portland State University

"One thing we learned in revisiting our core was that the faculty's knowledge of the purpose of the core and the relationship of the core to the undergraduate curriculum as a whole was not as well understood as it could be. The process of review can be extraordinarily touchy, but it can also encourage much-needed dialogue that might not otherwise occur... conversation around why we do what we do, whether we are doing what we want to do, and whether the core that we have actually fulfills the ideals that we have for it."

- John Norris,
Associate Provost, University of Dallas

IDEA:

"ACROSS THE CORE"

The University of Dallas offers a one-credit, general-studies course called "Across the Core." Faculty representing various academic departments visit the course to discuss the core, their disciplines' relationship to the core, and how their disciplines interact. The course is an opportunity to model interdisciplinary conversation for students—and to encourage it among the faculty.

SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS

In addition to these curriculum decisions, institutions should think ahead to plan how they will integrate academic and student support services to support the goals of the general education curriculum including:

- College readiness assessment and placement

- Student advising and orientation

- Early warning identification and intervention

- Financial aid to support completion

The 2012 *Cornerstones of Completion Report* [9] offers a comprehensive list of recommendations of research-based practices that support persistence and completion.

HOW WILL YOU DEMONSTRATE THAT YOUR GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM IS MEETING ITS CRITICAL OUTCOMES?

Many of those institutions that have made strides in reforming their general education program have planned a mechanism for regular and ongoing programmatic assessment, from the beginning.

For example, Portland State University uses both rapid, early-in-the-term assessment of student learning and end-of-the-year assessment of a random sampling of electronic portfolios to track the core outcomes of the program.

According to Helen Doerpinghaus at University of South Carolina, for this type of ongoing assessment to be successful, you will need to build faculty buy-in. It needs to be made clear that this is an assessment of a university-wide program, distinct from the majors and programs within their own discipline.

Telling the faculty who teach the core courses that other faculty from "outside their area" will be assessing student learning in "their" classes may be difficult, but it is a critical conversation that needs to happen, and it needs to happen early.

LINK ASSESSMENT AND FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

Portland State University also uses regular assessment to identify opportunities for faculty development. "We want to show the faculty how we are operationalizing a particular learning outcome," Yves Labissiere, the interim director for university studies, explains. "We need to know which activities are helping students develop that capacity, and which are not. These assessment results need to be fed back to the faculty regularly."

NOT JUST INTERNAL MEASURES

To adequately determine the effectiveness of the general education program, it will not be enough to simply assess learning outcomes. Think more holistically about measures of quality, and consider metrics such as:

- Attrition and completion rates
- Increases in net tuition revenue due to increased retention

- Cost savings from more efficient use of faculty and facility resources
- Career and graduate-program placements for students who have completed
- Employer and alumni feedback

Champlain College, for example, is preparing to follow up with graduates of the new program three to four years after graduation, to ask about the impact of the new, interdisciplinary core curriculum on their lives and careers

Additionally, if your core curriculum includes a capstone project or other integrated learning activities that require service learning, civic engagement, or undergraduate research—where the student's work is intended to have a real and measurable impact either in the community or in the scholarship within their chosen field—you can track:

- Feedback from community partners
- Local, regional, or even national recognition for capstone projects
- Undergraduate researchers' participation in symposiums or other events

WATCH FOR THESE BLIND SPOTS

After reviewing the processes--and challenges faced--at 308 post-secondary institutions in North America, and after our follow-up interviews with a select group of academic leaders, we have identified several common "blind spots" —decision points that most curriculum committees skip.

We have also identified a handful of institutions that *didn't* skip these critical steps, and that were able to develop a more holistic and impactful core curriculum.

ARE YOU TALKING TO ENOUGH FACULTY?

When most institutions engage in reforms, they don't seek the input of external stakeholders to help define the goals and outcomes of general education programs—a critical mistake. And our research shows that even many internal stakeholders are only minimally consulted, if at all.

Yet, when asked what challenges they face in reforming general education, many academic leaders responding to our survey indicated that the most significant was overcoming faculty resistance to the effort. In fact, out of 223 institutions that answered this question, more than half cited "faculty turf war" or "resistance to change."

And in our follow-up conversations, many institutions that have completed a reform effort regretted not including more faculty earlier in the conversation.

The reality is that communicating about the process early and soliciting input from a broad base of faculty, rather than just involving the "usual suspects," can help to alleviate tensions later in the process, ensure greater buy-in for the eventual rollout of the revised curriculum, and help you in crafting a core that leverages the combined brainpower of your entire institution.

> "Who does the core curriculum belong to? It belongs to everyone. Everyone is a stakeholder. Conduct surveys, brown bag discussions, information sessions with opportunities for feedback, a regular town hall, or a blog. Find ways to involve as many people as possible, and invite them to care and to contribute by making the work visible."

> - Elizabeth Beaulieu,
> Dean of the Core Division,
> Champlain College

ARE YOU *ONLY* TALKING TO FACULTY?

It's a given that faculty will drive the general education reform, but as we have shown, there is a significant opportunity to take a more holistic approach to improving the quality of the general education program. Yet, only 3 out of 308 institutions surveyed involved or solicited input from stakeholders outside of academic affairs—less than 1%.

During our follow-up calls, we asked institutions to tell us who they wished, in hindsight, that they had included in the general-education reform effort.

The answers: employers, students, alumni, representatives from student services, and admissions.

ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT
Another Academic Impressions survey (September 2013) found that 47% of institutions have experienced enrollment declines this past year—and some of those declines are significant (with enrollment targets missed by 5, 10, or even 25%).[10] Given this, can inviting enrollment managers to the table help inform efforts to ensure that the general education program is distinctive and competitive?

STUDENT SERVICES AND ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES
The general education program—because it touches all of your students and does so from the first week on campus—offers your best opportunities for a positive impact on persistence and academic success. Should you invite input from those offices in student services and academic support services that most regularly review data on student retention and that direct many of the institution's co-curricular and advising initiatives aimed at improving retention?

STUDENTS

As you strive to develop a core curriculum that is relevant and effective in preparing students for the demands of twenty-first century citizenship and the twenty-first century market, will you invite students to the early discussions of the reform effort?

"I come from a learning communities background and deeply value student feedback and participation; although the curriculum is absolutely the purview of the faculty, it is shocking to me when no students are involved in an initiative that so dramatically affects them and their entire four years of education."

- Elizabeth Beaulieu,
Dean of the Core Division,
Champlain College

ALUMNI

Your past students may be able to offer the most critical insights of all. They can tell you what skills and competencies matter to them in their lives and careers, and can offer examples of where your curriculum supported—or failed to support—the development of those skills. They may be able to cite specific learning experiences they wished they could have had. Consider:

- Conducting a survey of your alumni early in your review of the core curriculum

- Assembling an alumni advisory board

TWO FOR ONE

Engaging alumni through an advisory board can both inform important curricular changes, but can also serve to engage them in meaningful ways that may lead to future support.

Task the board with real research projects; have them help you with environmental scanning or with surveying employers and other stakeholders. Present them with some of your most challenging questions and benefit from their combined brainpower. This strategy treats alumni as key stakeholders and cultivates greater investment in the institution.

EMPLOYERS

What mechanism can you put in place (advisory boards, interviews, solicitation of feedback at multiple points in the process) to invite input from employers, who are increasingly concerned with a "skills gap" in graduating students and thus are invested in the same learning outcomes you are: critical thinking, communication, information and digital literacy, problem solving, teamwork and collaboration?

Given the criticality of what general education can offer, we would encourage all institutions to engage a broad set of stakeholders in the process of setting goals and outcomes, communication and securing buy-in, and ensuring successful implementation of the new standards. External stakeholders including employers, community leaders, and legislators should be brought into the process too, in appropriate ways, and not just for institutions with a public mandate. The focus has to be on alignment of stakeholder needs and institutional mission.

ARE YOU PLANNING FOR TRANSFER— FROM THE START?

To our surprise, transfer and articulation proved to be another blind spot. While we expected, in conducting our study, that credit transfer would be of less concern to some private, liberal arts colleges, we did not anticipate how few four-year public institutions and community colleges are planning intentionally for transferability and articulation when undertaking general education reform.

In fact, during our follow-up calls, only half of the public institutions we spoke with had considered transfer intentionally during their planning.

Some states (such as Texas) and some governing boards (such as CUNY's) have mandated general education reform with articulation specifically in mind. But outside of these cases, considering the impact of a curriculum revision on transfer appears to be more of a rarity.

Michael Amiridis, provost at the University of South Carolina, recommends holding early and ongoing conversations either with your feeder schools or with the schools yours feeds. The challenge, for public institutions especially, is to balance creating a distinctive curriculum without creating unneeded obstacles to transferability.

IDEA:

OFFER ONE-CREDIT BRIDGE COURSES

The University of South Carolina accepts block transfer from local institutions, but arrived at an innovative solution to help ensure that students transferring in are not left behind. USC created a set of one-credit courses specifically for transfer students, designed to address outcomes that are key to the Carolina Core, such as information literacy.

"We cannot do general education reform in a vacuum. We rely on our feeder institutions to prepare our transfer students for a degree at USC...and they rely on us."

- Michael Amiridis,
Provost, University of South Carolina

ARE YOU PLANNING A ONE-TIME INITIATIVE, OR A REGULAR REVIEW?

Don't let program review become a one-time effort that will only be undertaken again in ten or twenty years when the relevance and competitiveness of the program is again at issue. While it would be impractical to do a comprehensive review each year, find ways to leverage the significant investment of time and resources that goes into a reform effort. Once you have the mechanism of a general-education review committee or task force in place—and once you have given thought to how to assess the outcomes of the general education program—make the commitment to a regular process of assessment, review, and improvement of the program.

"Revising the core is part of a healthy process at a university, so the core doesn't become an idol that you worship but is continually reassessed to ensure that it is fulfilling the goals you have set for it."

- John Norris,
Associate Provost, University of Dallas

In establishing the new Carolina Core, the University of South Carolina made their general-education committee a standing group whose goal is to continue to ask what students need to know to be successful in the 21st century.

While the committee doesn't expect the outcomes of the general education program to change every six months, they will be continually reconsidering the learning outcomes and the design of the curriculum. "When changes are needed," provost Michael Amiridis remarks, "there is a group in place to assess that. This won't be a multi-year process that we undertake all over again."

CONFERENCE

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ai ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS

CASE STUDY: UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

USC's reform effort was especially thorough, including hundreds of faculty, staff, and students in the process and gathering data from employers and graduate schools about what students needed from the undergraduate experience in order to succeed upon completion.

What is also intriguing about USC's new "Carolina Core" is that it didn't involve any change in number of credits or in the essential course requirements for the gen-ed program. Instead, USC:

- Revisited its existing learning outcomes (aesthetic and interpretive understanding, problem-solving, effective and persuasive communication, global citizenship, and scientific literacy) to determine if they were still the most relevant outcomes

- Added two new "twenty-first century" outcomes (information literacy, ethical and social responsibility)

- Allowed the option for proposed general education course syllabi to satisfy two of the seven general education outcomes

WHAT USC IS ACHIEVING

By clarifying the core's outcomes and changing expectations around course syllabi, USC has effectively updated the content across all of its general education courses. It's an incredibly cost-efficient approach. "What has changed," Michael Amiridis, USC's provost, remarks, "isn't how many courses we offer or how many instructors teach them, but a mental expectation around outcomes. That is what's most important: changing what students are expected to learn in each class."

CASE STUDY: PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

To better support students in developing metacognitive skills such as critical thinking and social responsibility, Portland State has developed a four-year, integrated program in which faculty from varied disciplines teach courses that are developed collaboratively. For example, four faculty—a computer engineer, a philosopher, a developmental and molecular biologist, and an historian designed a first-year course exploring our conceptions of life, from cells to ecosystems, and the degree to which it can be altered.

Students seeking varied majors move through a highly structured program with specific and clearly defined pathways:

- First-year students take a year-long "freshman inquiry" track together, choosing one of the many available "themes."

- Sophomores take three interdisciplinary courses, each of which serves as a gateway to a group of thematically related courses from a variety of disciplines.

- Juniors follow one of the gateways and take three interdisciplinary courses related to the gateway theme.

- Seniors take a capstone course that involves action learning—engaging in a real project to devise a collaborative solution for a real challenge in the local community. The project is a collaboration of student, faculty member, and community representatives, and is intended to encourage the student to apply the skills he or she has been developing: critical thinking, communication, ethical responsibility, and diversity.

A KEY TAKEAWAY

Rigorous and regular programmatic assessment is what has made it possible for Portland State University to roll out a fully interdisciplinary program articulated across four years. Among other methods, Portland State pioneered the integration of electronic portfolios in the first year course and is working to extend their use across the University Studies curriculum and beyond, so as to collect and evaluate evidence of student progress toward developing metacognitive skills.

Portland State now offers and assesses hundreds of capstone projects, all with a civic engagement component. One such recent project—in which a student proposed solutions to the problem of student loan debt—was vetted regionally and received national recognition. Yves Labissiere, Interim Director for University Studies, comments: "These projects range from legislative issues to grant writing for local organizations. You can see the impact of the student and the university on the local environment."

CASE STUDY: CHAFFEY COLLEGE

Chaffey College, a community college in California, has a unique general education program marked by a yearly review effort and a focus on affective learning.

ANNUAL REVIEW

After an initial assessment and "curriculum cleanup" effort that resulted in the deactivation of many superfluous courses, Chaffey College now conducts a yearly curriculum review to phase out courses that are under-enrolled or are not designed effectively, and to ensure that students have clear and efficient pathways toward completing requirements.

The committee assesses all of the core competencies through random samples of student work, each year.

The committee conducting the review includes:

- A chair elected by the faculty, who reports to the faculty senate
- Two representatives from each school
- The director of the transfer center
- The dean of instructional support
- The catalog and schedule coordinator

AFFECTIVE LEARNING

Responding to recent studies showing that noncognitive factors such as resilience or "grit" are key indicators of student success, Chaffey College partners with the research organization Gallup to provide a hope scale and a mindset scale for entering students to help them to identify opportunities for growth during their studies at Chaffey.

For a deeper look at the issue of resilience and academic success, read our article ***"Predicting Student Success: When SAT and GPA Are Not Enough"***.

WHAT CHAFFEY COLLEGE IS ACHIEVING

Chaffey College has seen a 22% increase in degrees completed in the last year, and a 10% increase the previous year, without any corresponding increase in cost. "The program is not costing us less," Laura Hope, the school's dean of instructional support, remarks, "but we're using our money smarter and seeing more return, more results."

CASE STUDY: CHAMPLAIN COLLEGE

Champlain's themed and interdisciplinary core curriculum represents a marked departure from this private professional school's past general education programming. After all, Champlain has no liberal arts majors.

The new approach is designed to address the "skills gap" that employers have identified in the nation's graduating students and to provide a holistic education intended to help students develop "habits of mind" that will equip them to succeed.

When Champlain first rolled out its new general education program in 2007, it was an entirely common experience—highly structured, with student cohorts taking the same set of interdisciplinary courses together, and with two "faculty partners" paired with each cohort.

Since then, Champlain has stopped placing the second- and third-year students in cohorts, but the program remains highly structured. The curriculum features embedded information literacy instruction, a high degree of faculty collaboration, and an online platform permitting students to discuss issues with other students at institutions around the globe.

A KEY TAKEAWAY FOR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

The new core at Champlain College does elicit some initial questions from students—especially at the beginning of their study. A student who has enrolled at Champlain to study digital forensics may not immediately see what Shakespeare, for example, has to do with that field.

"It's about honing habits of mind," Elizabeth Beaulieu, the dean of the core division, explains. "The goal is developing integration as a habit of mind. As we become more developed thinkers, we are always making new, meaningful connections."

This raises a provocative question for other professional schools: To what extent is your core curriculum focused on technical knowledge, and to what extent is it designed to develop those "habits of mind" or metacognitive skills that employers are increasingly calling for?

THE OPPORTUNITY AHEAD

As competition for students grows more intense and the calls for accountability gain greater volume, institutions need to work quickly and aggressively to ensure they are doing everything they can to reduce costs and improve quality.

General education review and reform is a critical step toward achieving those goals, as these programs account for a significant portion of the institution's cost (upwards of 75% of instructional costs at some community colleges). As all institutions attempt to do more with less, reform holds the promise of **greater efficiency** (more degrees conferred with the same budgets) and **greater quality** (improved student learning and employability).

> "Gen ed is where an institution can define what it expects of students and what a degree from that institution means."
>
> - Lucie Lapovsky,
> Principal, Lapovsky Consulting

We hope this paper can jumpstart a conversation with key stakeholders on campus about the effectiveness of your general education program. Does your program:

- Improve persistence and retention rates?

- Provide competitive or financial advantages?

- Set students up for success after they leave your institution?

Answering these questions accurately, with data and with multiple perspectives, will be critical to the success of any reform effort. The goal is to identify core strengths of your program that you can build on—as well as opportunities for improvement.

Creating a shared understanding and vision for the future is critical to overcoming the entrenched interests of multiple stakeholders who have opposing views and goals. Reform brings many opportunities to enrich student learning, strengthen institutional vitality, and bridge the widening skills gap.

While such efforts are not easy to undertake, they are essential if we are to address the many naysayers who believe today's colleges and universities are no longer relevant or viable.

QUESTIONS OR FEEDBACK ON THIS REPORT?

We would love to hear from you! Please contact **Amit Mrig**, President, Academic Impressions, at **amit@academicimpressions.com.**

METHODOLOGY

Academic Impressions pursued a two-part study in July-August 2013.

First, we conducted a random sample of 3000 institutions of all types and sizes from the US and Canada. The survey saw a 10% response rate. The purpose of the survey was to benchmark efforts to reform general education.

Second, we selected 25 institutions that had been mentioned in industry publications as having an edge in general-education reform, and we conducted two rounds of interviews with academic leaders at those institutions. These were phone interviews with some follow-up, written correspondence. The phone interviews gave the opportunity to ask some specific questions about whether and how those institutions that have been noted as standing at the leading edge have addressed some of the missed opportunities that we noted in reviewing the survey findings.

This paper reviews the research findings and also features approaches from four of the 25 institutions. The four were hand-selected by our team based on the comprehensiveness, intentionality, and distinctiveness of their approach to re-envisioning general education.

ENDNOTES

[1] See *Cornerstones of Completion* (http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/CBD_CornerstonesOfCompletion_111612.pdf) and other reports from Completion by Design (http://www.completionbydesign.org/)

[2] *The Other Higher Ed Bubble*. Academic Impressions, 2013. http://www.academicimpressions.com/news/other-higher-ed-bubble-full-report.

[3] A full report on this study will be released from Academic Impressions in fall 2013.

[4] Wabash National Study 2006-2009. http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-research/

[5] See the AAC&U report *It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success* (April 2013). http://www.aacu.org/press_room/press_releases/2013/leapcompactandemployersurvey.cfm

[6] Quoted in: the article "The Value of a Liberal Arts Education" in the *Huffington Post*: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/edward-j-ray/the-value-of-a-liberal-arts-education_b_3647765.html

[7] See the CIRP Freshman Survey from HERI, the Higher Education Research Group: http://www.heri.ucla.edu/cirpoverview.php

[8] See the AAC&U report *It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success* (April 2013). http://www.aacu.org/press_room/press_releases/2013/leapcompactandemployersurvey.cfm

[9] See the 2012 study *Cornerstones of Completion* (http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/CBD_CornerstonesOfCompletion_111612.pdf)

[10] A full report on this study will be released from Academic Impressions in fall 2013.

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