

General Education Reform in Hong Kong: Leadership for Success

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Hong Kong is in the midst of implementing a bold, new, and comprehensive academic revision in its universities and schools. This is the most significant reform initiative that I know of on the planet, in large part because it has the potential to impact university education not just in this city but also in mainland China, as well as in other countries across Asia (Chapman, 2013).

It is a truism to say that people are often not aware of the significance of the social changes that are taking place all around them, and that it may take the eye of a foreigner to see the importance of what is happening. As a lifelong student of academic changes in the United States, I am impressed by the historic changes taking place in Hong Kong today. It is extremely rare for a community to make dramatic structural and cultural changes in *both* secondary and baccalaureate education at the same time. It is also commendable for that community to envision their university graduates having not only specialized knowledge, but also an understanding of

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where that specialty fits in the broad spectrum of human knowledge. It is remarkable for that community to expect that its graduates will possess intellectual capacities for analytical and integrative thinking, critical and creative thinking, ethical and civic responsibility, and a global perspective. For this initiative to take place within the largest country in the world, one that is playing an increasingly important role in world affairs, makes this initiative even more historically significant.

The Ambitious Agenda for General Education

On the surface, there seems to be no reason for Hong Kong to undertake a major educational overhaul. Although Hong Kong is but a city, it is a world-class one that is both a gateway to China and at the crossroads between East and West. Having been a British colony, Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997 to be operated for 50 years as a Special Administrative Region with freedom of speech, expression, and assembly and a capitalist economy. Its economy has been doing exceptionally well, and its citizens are relatively prosperous, healthy, and well-educated. Further, Hong Kong students score near the top of international tests, especially in science and mathematics; most of them know more than one language; and they are generally aware of other cultures and world events.

But there are good reasons for making academic changes. Hong Kong is a service- and knowledge-based economy that relies on an educated population. In the words of a higher education review group cited in a University Grants Committee report (2004, p. 3), “The ambition to be Asia’s world city is a worthy one, but there is no doubt that realization of that vision is only possible if it is based upon the platform of a very strong

education and higher education sector.” Employers of university graduates, however, have reported that although students are very good at memorizing and taking tests, they are not very good at solving unscripted, real world problems. In short, educational changes in Hong Kong are a strategic investment to remain competitive in the global economy.

The particular academic change that is being embraced is the tradition called liberal education, which emphasizes the disciplines known as the liberal arts and sciences. More particularly, the new approach is “general education,” in which all students, whatever their academic specialization or intended career, acquire a “broad, general education,” involving history and culture as well as science and mathematics. A broad general education helps students learn how their special knowledge fits into the wider panoply of learning. In addition, this approach emphasizes a number of generally useful intellectual skills, including the disciplined analysis of ideas and issues, critical thinking, effective communication, and the formulation of one’s own ideas in a manner consistent with scholarly and scientific knowledge.

The educational reforms in Hong Kong started in the public schools. Traditionally, students were compelled to attend secondary school for five years until the age of 16. The curriculum was based on very specific content preparing students for concentrations in certain fields of study and for two high-stakes tests. The top third of the class, as determined by the first major test, were eligible to attend public school for two more years; and the top half of those, as determined by the second major test, were able to enter a university. The reform made secondary schooling compulsory until the age of 18, dividing the time spent in secondary school into a junior and senior level of three years each. In the senior portion, students are now introduced to Liberal Studies, a compulsory subject required for university

admission, where they are expected to acquire a broader education and explore what might be called “big questions.” The new scheme is known as the 3+3+4 program.

As to the curricula of the public universities, they are overseen and supported by the University Grants Committee (UGC), an arm of the government. The UGC mandated the move to a four-year degree starting in 2012 and encouraged each institution to devote a significant part of its curriculum to general education, to provide a broad, general education for all students. It wisely did not mandate the content or structure of general education and set a date several years in advance so that faculties could learn, discuss, and decide on the best course of study for their institution’s own mission and culture. It also provided funds to support faculties as they learned about general education and devised their own program. Indeed, my first involvement with this initiative was in 2009, when I was invited to make a keynote speech on faculty and curriculum development at a conference, one of many events to help prepare for the new program.

One of the most creative and effective mechanisms to support the public universities was a special form of the U.S. Fulbright Scholar Program. The highly respected Fulbright Scholar Program is an international exchange of research scholars, both Americans who conduct their research in a foreign country, and foreign scholars who conduct studies in the United States. All scholars are rigorously peer reviewed and supported by the U.S. government. To meet the special needs of Hong Kong universities developing new general education programs, an innovation was introduced. The Fulbright program solicited applications from noted experts in general education from diverse institutions throughout the United States in all relevant undergraduate disciplines to serve as consultants and

resources to the Hong Kong universities. Rather than working individually, these Fulbrighters worked both as resources to the universities where they were assigned and as a part of the whole group that collaborated to serve all of the universities. They were known as Team Fulbright.

This scheme was conceived by Dr. Glenn Shive, Director of The Hong Kong-America Center and head of the Fulbright program in Hong Kong. Mr. Po Chung, a prominent businessman and philanthropist, generously provided funds to match the monetary commitment from the U.S. as well as from the UGC. From 2008 to 2012, a total of 24 Fulbright Scholars spent either a year or a semester in residence and were supplemented by four Fulbright Senior Specialists who spent six weeks—all working elbow to elbow with their Hong Kong colleagues to design and develop new general education programs. The four cohorts of Scholars gave lectures, led seminars, conducted workshops, consulted with various individuals and groups, and generally lent their expertise to enhance the new curricula. According to a report (Chu, 2012), their work focused on several substantive areas: writing-intensive courses, interdisciplinary teaching and learning, outcomes-based teaching and learning (a new mandate), first-year seminars, capstone experiences, vetting proposed courses, active and collaborative pedagogies, assessment of learning, and administrative structures and support for general education. In the end, the Fulbright Scholars functioned as intellectual resources, stimulants, and catalysts for change, mentors for their colleagues, and facilitators of communication among faculty and between faculty and administrators. All of those I talked with provided not only leadership for this effort, but also tried to build the capacity of their Hong Kong colleagues to carry on this work after the expiration of their terms. They were models of collaboration,

open communication, student-centered pedagogy, and the value of sharing across disciplines, backgrounds, ages, and institutions. Of course, some of the hosts were initially suspicious of foreigners and foreign ideas, but eventually, virtually all regarded this a valuable service.

It should be noted that I have always discouraged universities from finding a program that seems to work well elsewhere and importing it for their own use. This is because no matter how effective a general education program may be at one institution, it may not be appropriate to the mission, history, and culture of another one. Rather, I have always urged institutions, systems, and entire communities such as Hong Kong to design a program that is best suited to its own students, faculties, and circumstances. In no sense should Hong Kong faculties simply appropriate what has been done in the United States and use it in their own contexts. I am pleased to have observed that all Fulbright Scholars adopted this stance and sought to help their hosts develop their own programs of general education. The point is not that this Fulbright program should be continued indefinitely. It is that some similar program that provides significant assistance to the faculty and their colleagues is needed as they proceed to implement their own programs that constitute roughly a quarter of the entire baccalaureate degree requirements.

In addition to the eight publicly funded universities, other institutions in Hong Kong are privately financed. Faced with a new degree structure in the public universities, they also needed to review their programs. These institutions had come to play a more important role in in the changing landscape of higher education in Hong Kong, because it was apparent that Hong Kong needed more university graduates to fuel its knowledge-based, service economy. The old system, which had still been in place in 2000,

only allowed about a third of secondary school graduates access to higher education. Many of those were in what was called the “sub-degree sector,” meaning one-year certificate programs or two-year associate degree programs. Lacking a formal transfer arrangement among its institutions, many graduates of sub-degree programs who sought a baccalaureate degree had to do it at foreign universities. The Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region entered the education debate and boldly declared that 60 percent of secondary graduates should have access to university education, almost double the existing number.

The Education Bureau took several steps to encourage the development of a parallel system of self-financing institutions, including: a Land Grant Scheme that granted land at a nominal premium to institutions starting anew or expanding; a Start-up Scheme that provided building funds; a Self-financing Loan Scheme to award funds to meritorious students; and a quality assurance mechanism to oversee and approve programs at all of these institutions. In addition to enlarging the number of educated adults, this second sector was intended to broaden “. . . the opportunities and choices for further education, thereby providing quality, diversified and flexible pathways with multiple entry and multiple exit points for school leavers.” (Education Bureau of Hong Kong, 2013, p. 1)

By the academic year 2011–12, this Self-Financing sector comprised 28 institutions with a total enrollment of about 88,800 full- and part-time students, roughly a third at the baccalaureate level and two thirds in sub-degree programs. In contrast, the eight public universities enrolled around 84,900 undergraduates, roughly two thirds in baccalaureate programs and another third in sub-degree programs (Education Bureau of Hong Kong, 2013). It is clear that Hong Kong has succeeded in educating

a larger number of young people and providing more alternative paths for them.

When I visited in Spring 2012 as a Fulbright Senior Specialist, many of the institutions in what is called the Self-Financing Sector had barely begun to discuss general education. I was assigned by Dr. Shive, to work with this sector and help them establish mechanisms to get “up to speed.” In addition to visiting and speaking at several institutions, I worked with the leadership of the entire group.

A consortium known as the Federation for Self-financing Tertiary Education had been established, and it created a Working Group on General Education. Dr. Shive and I determined that the Working Group was composed of individuals who were the point persons for general education at their institutions. I was asked to help them recognize their important institutional roles as leaders of change, develop them into a cohesive group to assist each other, and share the basic strategies for leading the review and revision process. Thus, I planned and led a workshop on Strategies for Curricular Change, as I had done hundreds of times during my career. As preparation, participants read *Revising General Education—And Avoiding the Potholes* that Paul Gaston and I (2009) wrote, and they engaged the substance of strategies that had proven successful elsewhere. We discussed their anticipated problems of providing leadership for their institutions and strategies for engaging their faculty colleagues in constructive ways, helping them to learn more about the concept of general education, gaining administrative support and resources, and developing procedures and strategies that would allow the entire academic community to adopt significant changes in their undergraduate educational programs.

Hong Kong faculties, when faced with the need to add general education in their curriculum, turned to the United States, where this form

of education is common. Some turned to familiar American universities like Harvard and Stanford; some referred to those with signature general education programs, such as Chicago or Columbia; and others looked at colleges or universities with which they had personal ties, either as a student or faculty member. Inevitably, many discovered the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), whose web site, publications, and meetings were valuable resources. How did they use these resources?

First, each university developed a vision of the kind of educated student that they aspired to produce. Faculty members found the AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007) to be a useful template. The outgrowth of many years of experience with hundreds of diverse universities, the outcomes include:

- Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world;
- Intellectual and practical skills, including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, and written and oral communication;
- Personal and social responsibility, including civic knowledge and engagement, ethical reasoning, and teamwork and problem solving; and
- Integrative and applied learning.

Faculty members were encouraged by their leaders to develop outcomes-based teaching and learning approaches. Hong Kong universities adapted these outcomes to fit their own particular circumstances, something that also usually happens in the U.S. The configuration of attributes of university graduates in Hong Kong is often referred to as education of the “whole person.” The Hong Kong Polytechnic University spoke for many in saying that the ultimate goal is to create “all-round global citizens.”

Second, each university developed its own distinctive course of study. As may be expected, the programs are similar to those commonly found in

the U.S. All include a breadth component, often by disciplines across the broad domains of knowledge. Collectively, the programs include several “high impact” practices championed by the AAC&U, including significant student orientation and advising, first-year experiences, core curricula, interdisciplinary or integrative study, service learning, capstone courses, co-curricular experiences, and assessment. Virtually all of the universities have established an office to administer the new program, headed by a person appointed to direct general education. In the public universities, these curriculum elements will be phased in until the first class completing the new programs graduates in 2016. In the self-financing institutions, general education programs will be phased in as time and resources permit.

Reasons for Caution—and Continued Vigilance

As I alluded to in the opening of this essay, these reforms are full of potential to extend access to a university education to many more students and to enhance the quality of education for all. Such reforms involve not just the addition of a few more courses in the curriculum, but systemic change. Because a university is a complex and dynamic social system, attending to the health of general education is a large and difficult undertaking. It involves far more than a small slice of the curriculum and a few professors teaching a few courses to their students—although that is the heart of the enterprise. Because general education is required of all undergraduate students, it engages the interests of any department whose students take undergraduate courses, involves large numbers of faculty members, and has implications for many administrative policies and practices. Because of this wide sphere of influence, the task of making sure

that general education is working effectively necessarily requires a team effort, something that cannot be taken for granted in academic institutions populated by individuals who have been taught to “think otherwise.”

Developing and sustaining a vibrant general education program is far more uncertain than might appear to the uninitiated. Indeed, Frederick Rudolph’s (1977, p. 253) classic study of the history of the curriculum in the United States offers a cautionary tale.

Concentration was the bread and butter of the vast majority of professors, the style they knew and approved, the measure of departmental strength and popularity. Breadth, distribution, and general education were the hobby horses of new presidents, ambitious deans, and well-meaning humanists who were elected to curriculum committees as a gesture of token support for the idea of liberal learning. When that gesture collided with the interests of the department and the major field, only rarely did the general prevail over the special.

When speaking at conferences on general education, I have often started by asking the audience where their institution was in regard to reviewing or revising general education. Typically, the majority raised their hands when I asked if they were “just beginning” their review. When I asked how many were “just beginning *again*,” most hands remained in the air. It seems that there are major barriers that prevent even capable and well-intentioned individuals from succeeding in revising general education—and prompt repeated attempts. As of the writing of this essay only the first year has been completed.

The point is not that creating effective general education programs is doomed to failure. It is that this agenda is much more difficult and complicated than may appear on the surface. As Hong Kong leaders are sure to be discovering, such an enterprise requires much more attention and support, the willingness to intervene to counter the tendency to continue “business as usual,” and much longer than might be expected. In short, it requires effective and sustained leadership.

Leadership Required for Completing the Job

Impressive gains have been made in revising undergraduate degree programs in Hong Kong, but much more remains to be done. As of the writing of this essay, arrangements for only the *first year* have been completed, leaving three more academic years to go. Moreover, only the *first cohort* of students has completed a year of study. The other three years of the programs that have been designed need to be implemented. Further, academics everywhere realize that significant innovations seldom work exactly as they were designed during the first iteration. Innovations invariably can be improved upon with repetition, as bugs are identified, unanticipated problems arise, and better ideas emerge from actual experience.

If general education programs are to become both effective and sustainable, they will surely require sustained leadership from throughout the academic community. Who is responsible for providing such leadership? The best answer was provided by Harlan Cleveland, a former academic dean and U.S. Department of State official. In a session I once chaired, he told the audience, “Leadership is what happens at your level and above.”

He meant that everyone at a university can exercise leadership for general education—presidents and academic administrators, of course, but also professors, student affairs staff and, yes, even students. Making sure that a university provides a broad general education for all students, regardless of their course of study, is everyone’s business, because almost everything that happens in a university has implications, either positive or negative, for general education.

The central responsibility for general education rests with the faculty and with academic administrators, and it is important to acknowledge that there are natural tensions between faculty and administrators. In my experience, the vast majority of faculty members want to be good teachers, and they are often suspicious that administrators are not concerned about their needs and may not provide the support that they need to be effective with their students. Administrators, on the other hand, tend to expect faculty to understand their constraints and to do what is good for the instructional program. An effective general education program requires the cooperation of *both faculty leaders and administrators*, because, in the words of a classic AAC&U report (1985), “the task is for the faculty *as a whole* to assume responsibility for the curriculum *as a whole*.”

Further, both faculty members and academic administrators should enjoy the support of the institution for the best general education that they can devise. All institutional leaders should recognize general education as a central part of what students are expected to learn, and support efforts toward that end. The roles of several key leaders are discussed further below.

Faculty Leaders. Faculty members typically are rooted in their academic disciplines and specialties—we want faculty to be passionate

about their fields and to convey their excitement to students and others. But in devising a general education program, faculty leaders are well advised to adopt an institution-wide perspective that transcends their specializations and to focus on what kinds of learning all students need most—not just those specializing in their discipline.

In most universities, faculty members, often encouraged by their administrators, have developed an “individual contractor” model and concentrate on their own individual courses, students, and departments. Again, we want faculty to be passionate about these matters. However, in designing as well as implementing general education, faculty leaders should focus on fostering the desired educational outcomes of students that have been accepted by the faculty—and institution—as a whole.

Portland State University (OR) is a good example of how the faculty, strongly supported by the Provost and President, revised its general education program by focusing on student learning and adopting an institution-wide perspective. During the mid-1990s, Portland State was a struggling regional state university that had suffered from several years of modest funding and low morale. The University sent about two dozen faculty leaders to attend an annual meeting of the AAC&U and a special symposium on research on effective student learning. They learned that studies have shown the strong educational power of engagement with student peer groups and informal interaction with faculty members, and the importance of designing a curriculum to focus on university-wide learning goals. The faculty subsequently identified several high-priority learning goals: to conduct scholarly inquiry and think critically; to communicate well verbally and quantitatively; to understand the diversity of human experiences; and to acquire ethics and social responsibility. They also

decided to structure the general education curriculum around a series of interdisciplinary learning communities that intentionally addressed these goals. They designed a well-structured sequential University Studies Program that includes: Freshman Inquiry, an interdisciplinary theme-based year-long course; Sophomore Inquiry, a one-term course with a mentor section for support; an Upper Division Cluster of three linked courses on one of the sophomore topics and offered by academic departments; and a senior capstone, a six-unit community-based learning class. Of course, the University invested significantly in the professional development of faculty to implement the new program, assess the results, and make revisions as needed. The result is that the students generally achieved at higher levels, were more likely to remain in school and to graduate, and to become engaged in community activities. This innovation transformed the university, which subsequently received a large number of national and regional awards from prestigious groups. Many other examples can be found on the web sites of the Association for General and Liberal Studies and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, both of which have presented awards for assessments of student learning.

Teachers and Students. It is a truism that in their graduate training, few faculty members learn about teaching—the variety of students likely to be in their courses and how to interest students in their subject matter, structure a course or curriculum from simple to complex learning, assess student mastery, and provide advice and to counsel students with particular learning issues. As one Hong Kong faculty member exclaimed after attending a conference dealing with strategies for promoting student success, including a variety of teaching and learning strategies, “This is the first time in my 23 years of teaching that I have attended a conference like

this.” After hearing about “high-impact practices,” he commented, “I have never heard of this idea! Why not?” He observed that learning communities, one of the practices, is something his university should do now, because students need more community. This professor could be a poster child for the need for substantial investment in faculty development that focuses on student learning in general education as well as elsewhere.

Indeed, there are many organizations that focus on conducting primary and secondary research on student learning and on sharing the information with teaching faculty. Professors should be introduced to the professional literature on teaching, learning, curricula, and assessment as they seek innovations in connection with the drive to implement general education. One such group is the International Association for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, which holds conferences all around the globe.

Directors of General Education and of Major Program Components. In the U.S. many general education programs consist largely of a loose set of distribution requirements, a menu of courses from various departments that meet requirements for students to take one to three courses in broad domains of knowledge, such as the humanities and natural sciences. Until recent years, it was common for students to simply have to indicate that they had satisfied the requirements, and a registrar was the only member of the administration needed to verify that the requirements had been met. In effect, this kind of scheme consists of a number of discrete courses with little connection or coherence. It was “an orphan program” with no head, no specified faculty, and no budget. It consisted of whatever teachers and courses that departments wanted to assign for this purpose. But after revising their curricula to be more purposeful, more coherent, and more central to the degree, institutions often created positions to provide

greater coordination and direction to this large portion of the undergraduate curriculum.

Many Hong Kong universities have wisely created the positions of director of general education as well as directors of major components of the programs. For example, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) already had a very impressive program of general education in one of its small colleges, which all of the students in that college had been required to follow. Rather than inventing its current program from whole cloth, it elected to primarily scale up this existing program to serve all of students in the university. It already had a position of Director of University General Education to provide overall leadership, and the scope of the position became greatly expanded when the current leader, Dr. Mei Yee Leung, assumed the position. Similarly, Dr. Julie Chiu directs a newly expanded core course entitled “In Dialogue with Humanity” and Dr. Wing Hung Wong directs another expanded core course entitled “In Dialogue with Nature.” Both courses are required of all undergraduates. In 2012–13 a combined total of 3,604 students were enrolled in those courses, 150 sections of which were offered, involving 27 teachers. It is important for faculty to learn from each other how best to teach these interdisciplinary courses, to foster consistency across sections, and to promote coherence in the program as a whole. Specific leadership is needed to achieve these purposes. (A fuller description of the general education CUHK program may be found on the University’s web site.)

Yet, just creating this kind of structure and appointing competent people is not sufficient to ensure the success of a general education program. One Director of General Education confessed to me that he had a difficult time getting the attention of his Provost. Directors have little real power—

a small budget and few other resources—and if they are to be effective, they need to be able to expect to receive active support from the senior central administrators.

Deans and Faculty in Professional Fields. Historically there has been tension between those engaged in general education, typically consisting of study in the liberal arts and sciences, and those in professional fields that emphasize more practical matters. Although the liberal arts and sciences have been the core of a college education, in recent years they have been criticized for being impractical, a frill, and a luxury that can no longer be justified. Professional fields of all kinds have grown in size and influence. Today, there is a widespread belief that all students, whatever their specialization or intended career, should have knowledge of history and culture as well as science and mathematics, have foreign language and quantitative capacities, possess the skills to think critically and express themselves well, and have the ability integrate and apply knowledge to real world problems. These are qualities desired by employers (Hart Research Associates, 2013) and by organizations that accredit programs in such fields as diverse as business, education, engineering, and nursing. In short, general education today is viewed as essential to successful professional education. In the words of John Nichols, a colleague who directed a project with professional accrediting bodies that I supervised, “Professional educators are the new ‘best friends’ of proponents of general education.” Deans and faculty members in those fields, too, have reasons for providing leadership for general education, because such learning is important to success in their fields.

Leaders of Co-Curricular Activities. As important as curricular strategies are in addressing the learning goals associated with general education, it is important to note that much learning occurs outside the

classroom. Student orientation programs, which are sometimes designed to facilitate the adjustment to university life, can also include a healthy emphasis on the learning goals and curricular expectations for new students. Academic and career advisors often concentrate on a student's particular concentration of study. Advisors can convey a respect for the value of general education, and help to overcome the tendency of students (at least in the U.S.) to look down on general education and see those requirements as something "to get out of the way," presumably so that they can concentrate on their specialized fields of study. Those students who live in dormitories can find activities that reinforce and stimulate interest in the goals of general education. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators supports this agenda in its publications, such as the one by Collins and Roberts (2012) calling on student affairs staff to address specific learning objectives of the institution.

Student government can also support or undermine general education. It should not be forgotten that the widespread student unrest in the U.S. during the 1960s was in part fueled by criticism of the faculty's neglect of required general education courses, relegating them to less effective teachers whose own courses did not attract many students or to teaching assistants who were poorly trained and supervised. At that time, introductions to the various disciplines frequently were offered in large lecture courses that militated against student involvement and that subsidized small courses in the majors. Students were correct to point out these failings, but unfortunately, they demanded the abolition of the requirements rather than the improvement of the courses so that those courses would actually achieve the important purposes for which they were intended. Subsequently, student government leaders at some institutions supported initiatives of

their faculties to revise general education to make it more purposeful and engaging for students.

Provosts and Presidents. A well-worn aphorism states that all politics is local, and it applies to the leadership of central administrators. I know institutions where the faculty will not take seriously a request to review or revise general education unless the president calls for it. There are other institutions where a statement of support from the president is the “kiss of death” for a curriculum proposal. The president and provost certainly need to support general education, but local circumstances dictate where, when, and how such support is demonstrated.

Many administrators have gained their positions by articulating the principle that they should “hire good people and then get out of their way.” As attractive as that line may sound to those whom they supervise, experienced administrators know there are times when actions—sometimes unpopular ones—are required to improve conditions for student learning. As a practical matter, most initiatives to improve general education are launched by the Provost, as the chief academic officer (CAO). I routinely recommend that the Provost consult extensively with the faculty and, to the extent practical, jointly appoint with leaders of the faculty governance body a task force or some such group to review and/or revise the curriculum. This step demonstrates clearly that the initiative is owned jointly by both the faculty and the academic administration. Once the faculty group is formed, it is the role of the CAO to support it by words but also by deeds and resources. And once a curriculum proposal is approved, the CAO is responsible for implementing the program as intended.

Of course, a university is more than a general education program, and in largely undergraduate institutions it is the responsibility of the central administrators to support all sectors of the institution—the several

departments and their specialized education and research programs, the student affairs activities, the professional development of the staff, and public service and outreach. General education is just one program among many, and the point is that leaders must balance a number of other institutional missions while also supporting general education. Although there is a tendency to think in terms of “either-or,” a more realistic strategy is to think in “both-and” terms and to seek a balance among competing priorities.

In universities with a research and graduate education mission, the same formula applies, although the task of achieving an appropriate balance—and to be perceived as doing that—is more difficult. The point is that not only is it possible to operate a high-quality general education program in complex academic institutions, but also that it is essential to assure that general education gets its fair share of support and resources. In research universities that are used to judging their excellence by ratings based solely on faculty grants, research, and publications—as is the case in many Hong Kong universities—this is not an easy task. But effective leaders will find ways to make general education a center of excellence that is not subservient to the research enterprise.

Boards of Trustees and Government Officials. Hong Kong government officials showed extraordinary leadership by moving its public universities to offering four-year degrees, encouraging degree programs to include a significant amount of general education as a norm, and supporting the faculties over a number of years as they sought to fulfill those expectations. But after such signal developments, Hong Kong has entered a more normal period. During normal times, at least in the United States, boards and governments are expected to recognize and respect faculty authority over the curriculum and academic matters.

But even during normal times, boards and governments are expected to provide oversight of the academic program, including general education. The Association of Governing Boards, the professional organization of trustees in the U.S., typically recommends that boards exercise restraint and rely on *raising questions* to get information about their major concerns rather than issuing mandates. Boards can take either of two stances: they can either exercise their power and mandate certain curriculum matters or they can seek information, encourage faculty to provide evidence of effectiveness, and support faculty as they seek to make improvements. Almost invariably, mandates to the faculty generate powerful negative reactions and are rarely successful. On the other hand, requesting evidence, encouraging, and supporting efforts to improve are generally more effective.

Writing in the Association of Governing Boards house organ, *Trusteeship*, Carol Schneider (2012) called for boards to ask three basic questions about student learning and academic quality: “How strong are your expected learning outcomes (with reference to the AAC&U essential learning outcomes)? Is your curriculum aligned (to support the learning goals both in general education and in the majors)? Do you have cornerstone, milestone, and cumulative assessments?” Boards and governments have every right to expect that faculties will be able to provide informative answers to these questions.

Institutional Policies/Procedures to Support General Education

Effective general education programs require significant institutional support. Nearly everything that happens in a university has implications—either direct or indirect—for general education. New general education curricula need to have strong academic and institutional support if they are

to continue for the long haul. Below is a list, not necessarily exhaustive, of supportive policies and practices that, at least in the United States experience, would advance a strong general educational program.

- Large numbers of faculty members must be recruited to teach and revise general education courses as years two through four components are implemented. Recruitment and training must become a continuous process, because programs are already seeing turnover after only one year. This process of rotating into and out of general education programs may be expected to be continuous. New faculty members must learn what general education is, how their courses are distinctive in serving general education purposes, and become comfortable and effective with this form of education, which is unfamiliar to many.
- In effective general education, teaching staff learn to work collaboratively to implement a “program” of general education. As they work together, they become part of a “community of scholars,” or in current lexicon a “learning community.”
- Instructors, at least in part, must change their pedagogy “from teaching to learning,” in which students and their whole development occupy center stage. This can be expected to be a continuous process of learning, experimenting, assessing, and making mid-course adjustments.
- Students will need to abandon their comfortable habit of learning by rote and regurgitating the “correct” answers in examinations. Like their professors, they must learn to venture outside their “comfort zones” and feel comfortable with developing their own ideas and getting feedback from their peers and teachers.
- Students will need to understand, progressively, the nature of general education and why it is an essential part of their education. They should not have to ask, “Why do I have to take this course?”

- Institutions will invest in continuing faculty development programs, so that professors can learn from early experience, discuss both the pros and cons of what has happened individually and collectively, and make whatever changes might be called for in their courses and programs.
- General education and the majors will become more closely integrated, because as the late Ernest Boyer (1988) noted, “Rather than divide the undergraduate experience into separate camps—general versus specialized—the curriculum at a college of quality will bring the two together.” It is to be hoped that specialists will come to recognize the value of general education and build on that learning by promoting connected learning, higher order intellectual skills, and perspectives like globalization, diversity, and moral reasoning in their specialized courses.
- Student affairs staff must develop a range of extracurricular activities that encourage student learning in ways that supplement and complement classroom learning.
- Presidents, provosts, deans, and department chairs should embrace general education, speak knowledgeably and favorably about its value, and allocate financial and human resources to general education. They must not take the resources gained from involvement in general education and use them to enhance research or the majors at the expense of general education.
- Institutions will provide rewards for faculty who are effective teachers in general education, ideally by embracing what the Boyer (1991) called “a broader definition of scholarship.” This recognizes that faculty members actually engage in scholarly activities beyond simply publishing articles in their disciplinary journals. They also apply their knowledge in service to the community, integrate ideas across academic

disciplines, and engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning. In this scenario, faculty will be rewarded for the rich variety of scholarly work that they do in relation to general education.

- Universities should establish effective student advisory programs to help students make choices that are right for them.
- Universities and their public spokespersons must educate the public about the “practical value of general/liberal education.” It will be especially important to explain to parents why a broad education is important for their sons and daughters and how it will help them to succeed in their professions.
- Universities should establish programs to assess the extent to which students achieve the expected learning outcomes, provide feedback to the community, and expect professors and staff to use the results to continuously improve the programs.
- Faculty and staff at both public and Self-Financing institutions should work together to understand each others’ educational programs, assure that students achieve substantially the same outcomes, and create more and easier pathways for students to transfer between and among all institutions.
- The government and the citizenry must continue to provide the necessary financial support for the new programs, so that the new initiatives send their tender new roots deeper into the academic soil and become institutionalized.
- Employers, ideally, will be pleased with university graduates who are more broadly educated, can think more creatively and solve unscripted problems, have a strong sense of their native identity, are more prepared to cope with the demands of globalization, and are more effective world citizens.

In sum, ideally, the entire culture of the university will support general education, and not allow other important priorities to undermine this central part of the degree program. But it will take extraordinary leadership from all sections of the university over a sustained period of time to ensure that university students acquire the aims of general education, or what used to be called the “marks of an educated person.”

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