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GENERAL EDUCATION AND STUDENT TRANSFER

**Fostering Intentionality and
Coherence in State Systems**

Edited by Robert Shoenberg

A Publication of the Greater Expectations Initiative



*Association
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Faculty Collaboration and Statewide General Education Reform

The Case of Utah

*By Ann Leffler, Philip I. Kramer,
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If reforming campus general education is like moving a graveyard, then conducting system-wide reform is like levitating one. In the Winter 2000 issue of *Peer Review*, Robert Shoenberg cogently explained that system-wide general education reform is fraught with potential conflicts. And yet in the Utah System of Higher Education, faculty have become accustomed to, even enthusiastic about, collaborating across institutional and disciplinary boundaries to improve general education. Despite the professoriate's customary loyalties to individual institutions and disciplines, faculties in Utah have found it worthwhile to think statewide about general education goals.

Why Consider Statewide Collaboration?

General education reform should be approached at the state level as well as locally. Taking this approach, however, requires many faculty to assume new identities. They must define themselves as *general education* faculty, not just faculty in particular disciplines; as *statewide* faculty, not just members of individual departments and institutions; and, most importantly, as *civic intellectuals*—public leaders—not just hapless punch dolls knocked down by hostile external forces, perpetually bouncing back to the hopeless task of standing up long enough actually to educate people.

Why should faculty do this? In this volume, both Shoenberg and Finkelstein report that an increasing number of students transfer between institutions. That growth may expand even more with transfers into and out of e-classes. There are also transfers from high school courses in which some students acquire as many as two years of college credit via advanced placement or dual enrollment. And there are students who do more than one of these things. In the past, colleges considered their reputable students “homegrown.” A stigma attached to the rest. As a result, the somewhat seedy issue

of articulation was either not practiced openly (institutions simply rejected outside courses) or was done laboriously, institution by institution and course by course.

Increasingly, transfer demographics and the accompanying political pressures discourage such snobbery, at least with respect to general education articulation. Too often what this means, however, is that faculty lose ownership of articulation. General education courses are articulated wholesale via statewide mechanical agreements that reflect ease of implementation rather than educational purposefulness. (The same may one day be true for curricula in the majors.) Every course at one institution becomes equivalent, usually because of a common course number or name, to every other such course at another institution. Make no mistake: when a transfer student is given three credits for a Psychology 101 course because the same name and number exist at that student's new school, the two courses have just been made equivalent. When a university looks at a transfer transcript, sees Biology 101 on it, and checks off a student's life sciences requirement, it is allowing the name and number to stand in for whatever educational purpose that requirement was intended to address.

When general education is changed from without and faculty believe they have lost ownership, they may retreat into areas of the curriculum they feel they still control—the major and graduate education—or they may ignore the external mandates.

We do not believe that educational purposefulness and transfer are antonyms. Rather, faculty must lead statewide collaborations to create larger visions of educational purpose. Why the faculty? On other political issues, it is a truism that change requires mobilizing key constituencies. This is true in academe too. Within the culture of faculty governance that has shaped American higher education for many decades, the faculty owns the curriculum. Certainly outside pressures like legislative mandates are a perennial possibility; certainly over time cultural forces shape and change the American classroom. But in the short term—which is the time frame desired for general education reform—what

happens in individual classrooms largely reflects the desires of individual teachers. To reform general education, the faculty must be mobilized. When general education is changed from without and faculty believe they have lost ownership, they may retreat into areas of the curriculum they feel they still control—the major and graduate education—or they may ignore the external mandates. So if offering transfer students purposeful general education is a goal, faculty must collaborate across institutions to shape and own the new approach. This leads us to what has happened in Utah.

The Utah Approach

The catalyst for Utah’s system-wide collaboration to reform general education is the Regents’ Task Force on General Education. This task force was originally convened in 1992 by Utah’s chief academic officers (CAOs) through the Utah System of Higher Education. It was a typical system-based ad hoc group. Its specific charge was very different from and much more modest than to reform general education: it was convened to evaluate a proposal by one campus for televised general education courses. The proposed use of television as a medium of instruction raised questions about the worth of what might be offered there. But when the task force tackled this issue, it was immediately evident that the system had no way of defining “worth.” This realization led to explorations of what general education was accomplishing statewide, and what it could accomplish. A snowball effect ensued, in which success at one venture led to explorations in another. Since 1992, the task force has been charged by Utah’s chief academic officers and the regents with a wide range of work involving statewide collaboration on general education. In addition, it has adopted the informal mission of serving as a key intellectual “meeting place” where faculty can exchange information and ideas about what is happening on each campus, and develop a shared perspective on curricular issues. Itself an example of faculty ownership, the task force also proselytizes for faculty ownership of issues ranging from general education to outcomes assessment.

Statewide Collaboration on General Education Goals

Although convened to address the modest issue of televised courses, once together, faculty representatives to the task force from Utah’s six public four-year and three two-year schools quickly began doing what faculty do when they get a chance to think beyond local and disciplinary borders: they began exploring common goals. This eventually raised the possibility of seeking goals that transcended individual institutions. Importantly, in this process, the task force wanted to support distinctive faculty voices and campus missions. How could both similarity and difference be protected? The task force started with the question “What is an educated person?” and followed it to explore whether statewide faculty shared pedagogical values—we sought common goals, not common courses—sufficiently to develop a mutual vision of general education. How much agreement was there about the core skills faculty want their students to develop?

Four years, many conversations, and—naturally—many subcommittees later, the task force agreed on a set of joint competencies in nine general education areas: quantitative literacy, writing, the social sciences, the humanities, the life sciences, the fine arts, the physical sciences, technology and computers, and (because it is a course mandated by the legislature) American institutions.

These are meant to represent minimum, not maximum, standards; they are meant to permit institutions great flexibility in how they are “packaged” for curriculum inclusion; and, we say with some trepidation, they are meant to be assessable at both entry and exit levels.

Statewide Collaboration on the Purposes of Education

The task force also decided that public conversations about higher education would be elevated beyond misunderstanding and cynicism only if we could remind the public—and ourselves—of the goals of higher learning. To this end, we began working with an organization of chief executive officers from some of Utah’s largest corporations. Their answers to “What is an educated person?” have proved both enlightening and politically useful. For instance, they insisted that students have a well-rounded general education that teaches them communication skills, exposes them to cultural diversity, and fosters various other educational outcomes that faculty sometimes fear are devalued outside academe.

With enthusiastic support from the commissioner of higher education and the chief academic officers, we also convened a regional conference titled “What Is an Educated Person?” The conference format mixed representatives from all the regional institutions, including private ones like Westminster College and Brigham Young University, and some Idaho schools that transfer large numbers of students to Utah, with business and political leaders. This first conference was so successful that seven more have followed. Topics of the second through fourth conferences involved assessment (discussed below), while the fifth conference, titled “It’s Not Your Grandparents’ Gen Ed Anymore,” covered technological and other changes in pedagogies and content, changes in the ways general education faculty respond to those changes, and the changing connections between high school and the general education curriculum. The sixth conference focused on how students learn and explored patterns of student transfer, time to graduation, and curricular problems in light of the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ 2002 *Greater Expectations* report. The most recent conference focused on student and faculty rights and responsibilities in general education.

Statewide Collaboration on Outcomes Assessment

The second of our “What Is an Educated Person?” conferences led us to the quagmires of assessment. At that time, Utah’s political climate seemed, as in some other states, to ensure the imposition of a particular nationally normed, standardized test. Like other such tests, Utah’s proposed test did not overlap with the general education goals the faculty had developed but would be used to evaluate the success of general education. The conference raised so many concerns about the

test—and simultaneously issued such a strong statement in favor of alternative forms of assessment—that the regents asked us to help them reconsider the issue. After the third conference, the regents decided to put faculty in charge of assessment. The next year, once assured that results would be issued in a way that did not permit comparisons within or between institutions, faculty developed the tests.

In spring 2001, course-embedded pre- and post-tests were piloted in quantitative literacy, economic history, American history, and American political institutions. The assessment of writing was done through a large-scale writing assessment, using student papers randomly gathered in 2000 and 2001 from English 101 and 201 sections throughout the system. Papers written at the beginning of English 101 counted as pre-tests, and papers written at the end of English 201 counted as post-tests. Analysis of these two sets began in 2002, with teams from all of the state's institutions rating them. Results indicated significant value added from the pre-tests to the post-tests. This approach to writing assessment has been adopted by three of the state's institutions for their own continuing use.

To our knowledge, Utah is the only state that has successfully piloted faculty-led system assessments of general education areas. An assessment of the assessment may therefore be useful for other states. The most thorough analysis is Philip Kramer's dissertation, "Planning, Designing, and Conducting Systemwide Assessment in Higher Education: A Case Study of Utah's General Education Pilot Assessment" (2003). Overall, the positive results of assessment in Utah included statistically significant pre- to post-test improvements in learning. These ranged from 169 percent improvement across pre- to post-test in mathematics, to 36 percent in American history, to 68 percent in economics. Such results should not be a surprise. But they were, even to faculty. After all, if segments of the public were not skeptical of higher education, assessment would not be a public issue.

Other positive results of assessment were found in the attitudes of the faculty who had participated. According to our survey, faculty did not teach to the test, found participating very worthwhile, and were willing to participate again. The regents and the legislature seemed happy as well. In terms of resources, the experiment took huge chunks of faculty time to design, administer, and analyze. But the external test alternatives would have cost much more money. By being embedded in courses, the Utah approach also preserved the student motivation necessary for test results to be meaningful. Because Utah faculty had designed the tests, students participated and their responses were serious—in contrast to student attitudes toward many standardized national tests, including a previous effort in Utah. A final positive outcome was faculty ownership of the curriculum in terms of both the process and the results.

Kramer, whose dissertation analyzed the Utah assessment pilot from a higher education administration point of view, reported additional positive outcomes besides those described above. They included the following:

- Stakeholders, including legislators, clearly agreed that the goal of improving the teaching and learning process was a critically important reason to conduct assessment.
- Many realized that articulating system-wide curricula, courses, degrees, and programs could be conducted in a way that increased curricular coherence, helped faculty become better teachers, and motivated students to become better learners.
- Many came to understand that demonstrating system accountability to internal as well as external stakeholders was an important purpose for conducting the pilot assessment.
- Faculty developed an appreciation for the invaluable role of senior scholars in constructing the assessment tests. Senior scholars facilitated the faculty discussions and the debates on how best to link the pilot assessment to system-wide goals.
- Faculty became more test-savvy. While ultimately they appreciated the strengths of nationally normed instruments, the tests faculty created did reach the basic levels of reliability and validity needed for confidence in the results.

There were negative outcomes too. The huge cost in faculty time was among them. The lack of resources to pay for analysis of qualitative tests except for writing meant that the instruments were multiple-choice questions that did not necessarily tap underlying general education goals. And within jointly developed test banks, individual tests differed because sections themselves differed between instructors and institutions. An additional shortcoming was that the tests measured courses, not full programs of study.

There were quirky disciplinary twists as well. For instance, mathematicians returned the pre-tests, despite possible contamination of the later post-tests, because what counts in mathematics is *how* students arrive at their answers—thus, students needed to see their work. Historians quarreled over which facts were important, so all of the facts wound up in the history test bank. Writing was not strictly “pre” versus “post” at all, except perhaps in some postmodern way. Across fields, test banks included items that from a test-design point of view were clumsy; after all, most faculty are not test-construction experts. Nasty logistical problems of administering the tests’ administrators and collecting and coding the data also arose.

Beyond all these specific problems, however, the most important result was positive. The regents, and implicitly the legislature, initially shared some of the national skepticism about the efficacy of general education. That was why they sought assessment. At first, they intended to conduct it annually. But faced with results that demonstrated learning gains, and with evidence that faculty

reluctance to assess truly reflects the practical difficulties of the task rather than fear of accountability, the regents suspended the experiment.

Statewide Collaboration on Teaching Evaluations

The task force also explored what we considered a more authentic approach to assessment than the outcomes assessment described above. This approach was based on a model developed by Dair L. Gillespie, an emerita sociologist at the University of Utah. The Gillespie model emphasizes what Shoenberg calls the “intentionality” of general education. Specifically, it asks students to evaluate classes in terms of larger curricular goals discussed at the start of the semester, providing what she argues is an intellectually sounder basis for judging classes than standard instruments. Gillespie proposes that far from systematically answering students’ questions about why they have to take certain courses, the usual teaching evaluation instruments suggest contradictory educational purposes and values to students. For instance, the usual instruments ask students to evaluate teachers in terms of enthusiasm and knowledge of subject matter, which implies that good pedagogy means being enthusiastic and that students can competently judge teachers’ subject mastery.

The Gillespie teaching evaluation instrument, on the other hand, simply turns course goals into questions, and asks students how the course affected their skills in each area. For instance, if one course goal is to hone critical thinking, then one question on the teaching evaluation instrument asks how much the course improved or diminished the student’s ability to think critically. Similarly, if one course goal is quantitative reasoning, then one question taps the effect of the course on that skill. Thus, the very act of completing a teaching evaluation form reminds students (and the faculty they judge) of the course goals. The results provide far more useful feedback to faculty than the admonition to become more “enthusiastic.”

Results of piloting the Gillespie approach have been mixed. In Georgia, it did not produce useful information. But at the participating Utah schools, it did. Furthermore, across Utah colleges and classrooms, results varied sufficiently to suggest that the approach taps actual differences in how courses affect general education skills.

Statewide Collaboration with Other Constituencies

Utah’s successful emphasis on collaboration and its catholic definition of what constitutes a “general education issue” have promoted conversation about various policy issues related to general education:

- **Advising:** In various focus groups with professional advisers, it has become clear that like the faculty, advisers can become effective proponents for purposeful general education. As with the faculty, the stereotypical adviser who values only courses in the major does not

reflect reality—advisers understand and support system-wide general education goals. Now that we know more about this group, advisers have been asked to join the periodic system-wide articulation meetings for the majors as well as for general education, and are invited to the conferences. With system-wide general education goals as a scaffold, Utah also created AdviseUtah, now Utah Mentor, a Web site to promote accurate advising information for parents and students.

- **K–12:** Utah’s Student Success initiative, started in 2003, includes K–12 linkages (Utah encourages students to take the first two years of college in high school through advanced placement and dual enrollment, and a special state scholarship rewards those who do). Task force members have been centrally involved in the initiative. A new task force has developed recommendations for improved articulation of the high school curriculum and the general edu-

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cation curriculum. Student Success also involves task force members in conversations with regents, institutional officers, faculty, advisers, and K–12 staff about how to improve high school students’ preparation for college general education. To date, only ten states have aligned high school graduation and college English admissions requirements. Only two have done so for math. Utah hopes to be in these vanguards, so task force members helped organize and chair a working conference of high school and college writing and math teachers to

improve coordination in these general education areas. Teachers compared their curricula and discussed how to mesh them.

- **Broadening the Faculty Conversation:** At “What Is an Educated Person?” conferences, focus groups periodically revisit the system-wide general education goals that their predecessors developed. These groups include faculty outside as well as inside the particular general education areas under discussion—for instance, engineers participate in the writing group. Conversations with faculty senate members across the state also involve them in the reform effort, as do reports to on-campus curriculum groups. Task force members have joined discussions to promote articulation within the majors, too. And as the three conferences on assessment suggest, a noteworthy quality of new academic values is the very fact of continuing conversations about a topic usually loathed by faculty.

The Moral of the Story

How has all of this happened? In Utah, one of the most important lessons we learned was to enjoy the experience for the political endeavor it is—which means, among other things, knowing and using local contexts. This suggests that what has worked across Utah campuses may prove disastrous elsewhere. Nonetheless, we believe that system-wide general education reform can be built on faculty ownership of the curriculum. Moreover, we believe that if the alternative to collaboration is command, collaboration is preferable. Our experience suggests that collaboration should initially follow the high road, asking “What is an educated person?” rather than dwelling on the mechanics of how to handle the hordes of barbarian transfer students at the gates.

A final lesson from our experience is that the reform process should be made fun. A major reward for activists is the excitement of finally getting to talk with other faculty about intellectual issues—across disciplines at that. We found that this should be encouraged, even if it seemed to take up time that would be better devoted to a forced march through the work at hand. In fact, this *is* part of the work at hand. Fundamentally, system-wide general education reform is not just about the intellectual development of students; it is also about the intellectual nourishment of faculty across the system.

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