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General Education Models: Continuity and Change in the U.S. Undergraduate Curriculum, 1975–2000

General education requirements comprise, on average, approximately 30% of the undergraduate curriculum and therefore represent an important feature of the student academic experience in American colleges and universities.

Previous studies have not fully examined the origins of the most important models of general education, the distribution of these models among higher education institutions, or the causes for change in general education requirements over time. In this study we describe and analyze the organization of general education requirements in U.S. four-year colleges and universities over a 25-year period, 1975–2000. We show that four models of general education persisted throughout the period. We will label these the “core distribution areas,” “traditional liberal arts,” “cultures and ethics,” and “civic/utilitarian” models. We show that two of these models arose near the beginning date of the study. The rise of these new models is one important change in general education. Another is the addition of new subject requirements, particularly in areas related to basic academic skills, gender and racial-ethnic diversity, and non-Western cultures. These course-level changes, we will argue, reflect

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responses to the deeper-lying forces of expansion and diversification of higher education, as interpreted by influential actors in the system.

Our study is in the tradition of social and institutional history. We are interested in the origin and diffusion of models of general education and the educational and political interest groups that have contributed to changes in this field of undergraduate education. At the same time, our analysis provides a useful perspective from which to comment on other approaches to organizational change.

In particular, our findings contrast in important ways with themes of the “new institutionalism” in organizational studies (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Against the Weberian model of rational-legal bureaucracy, the new institutionalism focuses, as we do, on organizations and organizational elements whose success has little to do with their greater efficiency or technical superiority over alternative forms of organization. However, unlike our analysis, the new institutionalism has emphasized the convergence of organizational forms around dominant models whose categories and narratives resonate with the ideals of progress and justice favored by the “western cultural account” (Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1987). The new institutionalism has also identified legitimacy seeking as a primary cause of convergence in organizational fields, because conformity with dominant models encourages public confidence and resources that allow organizations to reproduce and thrive (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The case of general education reveals a different set of outcomes: instead of convergence, we find non-convergence of forms; instead of a single dominant model, we find competing models; and instead of legitimacy seeking as a primary cause of change, we find multiple interest groups seeking influence in the field, with varying levels of success.

Our analysis is, in some respects, closer to the earlier form of institutional analysis developed by Selznick (1953, 1957) and his students. This earlier form of institutional analysis, sometimes labeled the “old institutionalism,” emphasized the stabilizing influence of the value commitments of organizational leaders and the interests of powerful external actors as sources of institutional change (see Perrow, 1986, chap. 5). Our findings are consistent with these emphases. However, our focus on the organizational field as the unit of analysis, on the persistence of competing models within the field, on the importance of slow accretions of change elements as well as major transformations, and on the multiple levels of structure in which change occurs all contrast with the emphases of the Selznick school, and therefore set our approach apart from both the “new” and the “old” institutionalism.

In the concluding section of the paper, we will comment on the implications of our study for the further development of institutional theory, and particularly for the analysis of institutional change.

Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework focuses on four analytical elements we see as necessary for understanding continuity and change in U.S. general education during the latter twentieth century: (a) the distinction between general education as a cultural movement and as an organizational phenomenon; (b) the origins and diffusion of competing models of general education; (c) the social forces and agents encouraging change; and (d) campus responses to these forces and agents of change. Before we present our empirical analysis, we will provide an overview of these elements of our conceptual framework.

General education as cultural movement and curricular structure. Although the terms “general education” and “liberal education” are now often used interchangeably, general education originated in the early twentieth century as a movement self-consciously opposed to liberal education. Where liberal education emphasized study of the heritage of Western civilization for purposes of contributing to students’ intellectual development and cultural appreciation, the general education movement, inspired by the work of John Dewey and other turn-of-the-twentieth-century progressives, focused on the integration of knowledge for purposes of engagement with the problems of contemporary civilization (Jencks & Riesman, 1967, pp. 492–504; Miller, 1988, chaps. 3–5).¹

As a cultural phenomenon, the general education movement gained a foothold during the 1920s and 1930s at institutions such as Bennington College, Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia College, and the University of Minnesota, and it has experienced many revivals since that time, each one of which has focused on integrating disciplinary understandings for the purpose of a well rounded treatment of core concerns of the contemporary world (Miller, 1988, chaps. 3–6).

However, in the life of higher education institutions, general education became more closely associated over time with the idea of breadth requirements than with the original progressive cultural movement of the early twentieth century. The term “general education” became connected to the curricular construct of breadth requirements, particularly in the 1940s and 1950s, as more colleges and universities adopted the curricular organization of majors, distribution requirements, and electives (Rudolph, 1977, p. 253). This process was already far advanced by the

mid-1960s when the first quantitative study of general education (Dressel & DeLisle, 1969) defined general education, not as integrative knowledge connected to contemporary issues, but as breadth requirements.²

The guild interests of departmental faculty, and perhaps particularly those of humanists, undoubtedly supported the triumph of this organizational understanding of general education as breadth requirements (see Rudolph, 1977, p. 253). One of the most reliable ways to guarantee a secure location in colleges and universities is for faculty to succeed in convincing their colleagues that courses in their field of study are an integral part of general education. The stability of departments, and particularly of small departments, can be highly dependent on offering service courses for students who must satisfy breadth requirements (Gamson, 1991).

Although the spirit of the original general education movement remains alive in some quarters of American higher education, our study is based on treatment of general education as an organizational phenomenon constituted by breadth requirements. In the conclusion of the paper, we will discuss the prospects of current efforts to revive general education in its original sense, as a movement drawing on knowledge from several disciplines to engage important issues of contemporary civilization.

The origin and diffusion of competing models. Breadth requirements vary greatly across colleges and universities, but a few primary patterns of requirements provide the deep underlying cultural structure for the field of general education. These patterns are discoverable through factor analysis. Four popular models persisted, in general outline, during the period of our study and therefore can be considered stable structural elements in the system. Two of these models have roots in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Two others are of more recent origin, one growing out of debates of the 1960s about Western civilization and the other responsive to state and employer interests in human capital development.

The most popular model, which we will call “core distribution areas,” originated in the opposition of Yale University to the free elective system introduced at Harvard University in the 1860s under President Charles Eliot. Rather than adopt the free elective system, in 1901 Yale created a curricular structure of concentration and distribution. This structure was soon adopted by a few other elite institutions on the eastern seaboard (Miller, 1988, p. 22) and more broadly following the university reforms of the 1910–20 period (Reuben, 1996, pp. 230–243). This constitutive period reflects a compromise between the established faculties in the humanities and new faculties in the sciences. During the mid-twentieth century, the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences emerged as core distribution areas at both private and public insti-

tutions, with mathematics and the arts joining this group at some institutions (Blackburn, Armstrong, Conrad, Didham, & McKune, 1976; Dressel & DeLisle, 1969).

During the period of our study, more institutions continued to require general education in natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities than in any other courses. We found no declines in the representation of natural or social sciences in our sample institutions during the period, but we did find that humanities were somewhat less frequently required than natural and social sciences (see Table 3 below), suggesting cracks in the long-standing convention of defining humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences as the principal divisions of basic knowledge.³

Other popular general education models during the period reflected very different conceptions of general education. The traditional liberal arts model originated in the classical curriculum of the colonial colleges, as modernized under the influence of the English and Scottish universities (Rothblatt, 1988). The traditional liberal arts model emphasizes subjects such as literature, history, philosophy, and foreign languages, and it does not include distribution requirements in natural or social sciences. Like other forms of “status education,” it focused on subjects distant from the practical skills valued by employers (Collins, 1977). By the 1960s denominational colleges had become the primary home of the traditional liberal arts model of general education (Jencks & Riesman, 1967, p. 493).

Cultures and ethics are more recent conceptions of general education, originating in the dissatisfaction of faculty members at a number of elite secular institutions, including Amherst College and Stanford University, with the Western civilization emphasis of general education courses in the 1960s, and the desire of these faculty members to expand the civilization concept to include non-Western cultures (Allardyce, 1982). Although initially promoted by faculty members on the political left, the culture and ethics model took a more conservative turn in the 1970s and 1980s, as it encountered deeply held commitments to Western civilization. Fostered by the National Endowment for the Humanities, a compromise solution encouraged study of both Western and non-Western cultures (Cheney, 1989).

A fourth popular conception of general education, the civic/utilitarian model, focuses on preparing students for civic and business life by exposing them to U.S. government, business, and technology courses. The origins of this model are obscure, but by 1980, it was found most often at state colleges in the midwestern and southern states. The model developed, in part, out of state mandates during the period for required U.S. and state government courses (Kendrowski, 2003).

We assume that popular models of general education have roots in particular locations within the organizational field, but that the relationship between original and current locations can become attenuated or even disappear as models circulate in an interacting system of organizations. We do not assume that emerging models necessarily supplant, or even partially supplant, previously dominant models. Instead, in fields as decentralized and loosely controlled as general education, where costs for non-compliance are low, competing models can co-exist without a single dominant model emerging.

Forces and agents of change. General education developed during the period not only through of the circulation of models, but, incrementally, through course-level additions and eliminations. Within the context of these competing models of general education, we observed considerable change at the course level.

Expansion and diversification were two primary social forces conducive to change in general education during the period of our study. Expansion, combined with continuing fiscal pressures in the public sector, encouraged concerns with student preparation for college-level work, while diversification led to concerns about the incorporation of women, minorities, and students from non-Western cultural backgrounds.

Expansion is a process fueled, in part, by social interests in opportunity, government policies in support of these interests, and the resulting inflationary pressure on educational credentials (Brint, 2006, pp. 162–172; Collins, 1979). The relative value of higher education credentials, as compared to secondary school credentials, also plays a decisive role in expansion (Katz & Goldin, 2007). Between 1960 and 2000, the number of students enrolled in postsecondary education quadrupled—from 3.6 million to 14.8 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007, Table 178). Expansion has led to the extension of higher education enrollment into strata of the population with limited previous family exposure to postsecondary education. Throughout the period of our study, business and government bodies indicated concern about the skill levels of college students. As interpreted by influential business and government actors, broadened access to higher education, while valuable for promoting opportunity, also raised questions about students' preparation for college-level work.

Diversification is a separate process growing out of the aspirations for equality of women and members of minority groups and the actions of government and non-profit advocacy organizations to support these aspirations. During the period of the study, women became the majority of all enrolled undergraduate students in American postsecondary educa-

tion, and the number of minority students increased 2.5 times—from 1.7 million in 1976 to 4.3 million in 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007, Table 217). By 2000, nearly 30% of all students were from racial-ethnic minority backgrounds (ibid.). Social movements placed issues of representation on the agenda of higher education institutions beginning at the time of the Civil Rights movement. As activated by social movements, diversification created an environment favorable to rethinking cultural contributions from the point of view of women and ethnic minorities, and from a global and non-Western perspective rather than from an American and Western perspective.

Leaders of colleges and universities are the proximate agents of change in general education requirements. Administrators and faculty are sensitive to the changing levels of preparation for college work and the changing socio-demographic composition of their student bodies, and they are consequently receptive to efforts to address the academic competencies and cultural interests of their undergraduate students.

Regulatory agencies and non-profit advocacy organizations are more distant change agents, but they can be more broadly influential because they reach across many individual campuses. These external agencies include, on one side, state legislatures and regional accrediting bodies linked to state human capital and accountability interests; and, on the other, foundations and specialized higher education associations linked to the traditional purposes of liberal and general education. During the period of our study, external agencies played an important role in the interpretation of expansion and diversification, and in the development of solutions to the concerns raised by these changes in student bodies.

Course-level adaptations. External change agents encouraged the adoption of new requirements. While the most popular models of general education showed considerable stability throughout the period, general education nevertheless remained in flux as new courses were added to existing requirements and courses perceived as outmoded were eliminated.⁴ In keeping with the goals of the leaders of key advocacy organizations, these processes led to a higher volume of requirements and more prescription. Consistent with the main political forces in the environment, the most popular new courses during the period sought to contribute to the development of basic academic competencies, consciousness of gender and racial-ethnic differences, and awareness of non-Western cultures.

Colleges and universities in our sample did not necessarily adopt new courses for purposes of securing legitimacy. Instead, they adapted to new issues in their environments, often turning to influential external actors for interpretations of the issues and appropriate responses to them.

Data and Methods

The data for this study come from the College Catalog Study (CCS) database. CCS is an archive of data on academic organization derived from coding of college catalogs over a 25-year period, 1975–76 through 2000–01.⁵ The research team coded catalogs at five-year intervals for six target years: 1975–76, 1980–81, 1985–86, 1990–91, 1995–96, and 2000–01. CCS is linked to a larger database, the Institutional Data Archive (IDA). IDA includes more than 2000 variables on institutional characteristics; student characteristics; research, academic, and extracurricular programs; and backgrounds and attitudes of institutional leaders over the same 25-year period. IDA is based on a stratified random sample of institutions from four tiers of American four-year colleges and universities: (a) highly selective liberal arts colleges and research universities, (b) other selective liberal arts colleges and doctoral universities, (c) masters'-granting universities, and (d) other baccalaureate granting institutions. CCS institutions are a subset of the 384 institutions in IDA. CCS institutions include the 292 institutions for which a full set of catalogs could be located for the six target years. The full set of observations in this study is consequently 1752 (292 institutions at six time periods each). Judging by standard institutional characteristics, CCS institutions closely parallel institutions in IDA.

Institutions vary between semester and quarter systems and in their computation of general education by courses, units, hours, and credits. The research team converted all quarter units to semester units using the following convention: We assumed 180 credits for graduation in quarter systems and 120 credits for graduation in semester systems. We multiplied all quarter credits by two-thirds to convert quarter credits to semester credits. We assumed that units, hours, and credits are synonymous terms. Some institutions only indicated requirements by referring to the number of courses required in categories, rather than credits, units, or hours. Unless otherwise stated in catalogs, we assigned three units for a course in semester systems and five units for a course in quarter systems.

The research team coded every subject required in each target year, including the number of credit hours required. In this paper, we use the following convention to distinguish "true requirements" from "optional requirements": true requirements have non-zero minimums, while optional requirements have zero minimums. In College A, the coding for a true requirement in philosophy might read 4–8 units, for example, with 4 as the minimum and 8 as the maximum, while in College B, the coding for an optional requirement in philosophy might read 0–8 units. In the

latter case, philosophy courses are authorized by the college as one of two or more ways of meeting a requirement. The research team coded the total number of required general education units based on the minimum number of units in the minimum-maximum ranges.

Models of general education can be discovered empirically through the use of principle components analysis, an exploratory technique that identifies latent factors in a related set of data elements. In this analysis, we used varimax rotation to produce orthogonal factors. In the analysis, we incorporated a coding scheme based on Euclidean distances, with the following coding: (0)–the subject did not appear as a requirement, (1)–the subject appeared as an option among two or more alternatives for meeting a requirement, and (2)–the subject was specifically required. This coding scheme allowed us greater precision in the factor analysis than a dichotomous choice between required or not required would have allowed. Not every institution aligned with a particular general education model included each one of the core subjects defining that model, but enough did that a core set of subjects emerged in the principle components analysis to constitute the central defining features of each model.

We examined the subjects that loaded on each factor in each target year and then assigned a name to the principle component based on these subjects. We used the following criteria to determine the retention of factors: (a) the Kaiser criterion (i.e. eigenvalues greater than one); (b) scree plots indicating the number of factors beyond which we find a linear decline in the fraction of total variance represented by each principle component; and (c) consistent interpretability across target years. Based on the Kaiser criterion and scree plots, we retained five factors from the principle components analysis. We report results for the first four factors, which also met the criterion of interpretability across target years.

We used ordinary least squares regression to investigate the extent to which institutional characteristics predicted adoption of one or another of these four models. These analyses used a standard battery of institutional characteristics as independent variables and factor-weighted scales identifying each of the four models as dependent variables.

In our analysis of changes in the volume and degree of prescription in general education, we measured volume by changes in the mean number of credits required and the standard deviation of credits required over the period. We measured prescription by changes in the proportion of “true requirements” (non-zero minimums) to “optional requirements” (zero minimums) over time.⁶ In our analysis of content change, we used a 29-category scheme to capture all fields that appeared at least ten times during the period.

In the factor analysis and regression analyses, we present weighted results in order to reflect more accurately the population of American four-year colleges and universities. Weights were developed for institutions in each tier of the IDA sample to reflect their proportional representation in the population of American four-year colleges and universities.⁷ We did not weight the results for changes in specific courses required, however, because we feared the potential for misrepresentation of trends in subjects that were only rarely part of general education requirements.

General Education Models

We now turn to the results of our analyses. We will first identify models of general education that persisted during the period of the study. We will then show the connection between models of general education and specific locations in the organizational field of U.S. four-year colleges and universities.

Four Models of General Education

Are different conceptions of general education common in American colleges and universities?

The principle components analysis (see Table 1) yielded four factors that met our criteria for retention. These were the most popular cultural models of general education during the period. In order of the amount of variance explained in the data, the first four factors can be described, respectively, as traditional liberal arts, core distribution areas, cultures and ethics, and civic/utilitarian preparation. We based these descriptive labels on the pattern of courses loading on each factor, keeping in mind the history of general education in the United States.

Judging by the frequency of required courses (see Table 3 below), the core distribution areas model provided the most prevalent form of general education during the period. The broad fields of natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities were the defining components of this model. During the period, the broad category of humanities weakened somewhat over time, with more specific required courses in English composition or English literature rising in many institutions to take its place.

Two other models of general education during the period focused explicitly on humanities fields, rather than on a broader range of breadth requirements encompassing both humanities and sciences courses. In each of the six target years, the traditional liberal arts factor included

TABLE 1 (Continued)
Rotated Factor Loadings of General Education Requirements

GE Requirement	Traditional Liberal Arts					Core Distribution Area						
	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
Freshman Seminar												
Senior Seminar												
Interdisciplinary												
Government												
Eigenvalue	3.52	3.35	3.19	3.06	3.18	2.94	2.17	2.08	2.06	2.16	2.32	2.22
% of Variance	12.12	11.55	10.75	10.55	10.98	10.15	7.49	7.16	7.10	7.45	8.01	7.65

Notes: Blank areas represent factor loadings with an absolute value of < 0.30. Factor Loadings were rotated using the varimax rotation method.
Source: College Catalog Study database.

TABLE 1 (Continued)
Rotated Factor Loadings of General Education Requirements

GE Requirement	Cultures and Ethics										Civic/Utilitarian								
	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	
Freshman Seminar		0.437	0.56	0.541		0.362	0.306												
Senior Seminar					0.415														
Interdisciplinary																			
Government							0.341	0.486	0.485	0.708	0.601	0.659							
Eigenvalue	1.56	1.94	1.88	1.9	1.68	1.78	1.47	1.64	1.66	1.6	1.53	1.58							
% of Variance	5.39	6.68	6.49	6.56	5.79	6.16	5.08	5.67	5.74	5.53	5.27	5.44							

Notes: Blank areas represent factor loadings with an absolute value of <0.30. Factor Loadings were rotated using the varimax rotation method.
Source: College Catalog Study database.

English literature, philosophy, history, religion, and arts. In most years, foreign languages also loaded on this factor. In contrast to this traditionalist approach to general education, a newer humanities-based model of general education embraced consideration of contemporary cultures, both Western and non-Western, and moral reflection in the form of a required ethics course.

The civic/utilitarian model does not make its first appearance in these data until 1980–81.⁸ The appearance of this model shows that not all popular forms of general education during the period reflected the philosophy that general education should broaden students' cultural horizons. Instead, general education was used on some campuses to prepare students for the world of civic and business life.

As Table 1 shows, the courses loading on each of the four factors were not completely stable throughout the period.⁹ Both speech and mathematics loaded on the core distribution areas factor in two panel years, and physical education loaded in one year. Mathematics and physical education loaded on the traditional liberal arts factor in some panel years and not in others, and foreign languages failed to load in one panel year. Freshmen and senior seminars sometimes loaded on the cultures and ethics factor, as did diversity and contemporary issues courses. The civic/utilitarian factor was the least stable of the four. Only government courses loaded on this factor throughout the period. However, business courses loaded on the factor in every panel year beginning in 1980–81, and foundations courses loaded in four of the six years. In addition, technical courses in one or another form (mathematics, computer science, or applied science) loaded during most of the panel years.

Institutional Characteristics and General Education Models

Are particular types of institutions more likely to prefer one or another of these four popular forms of general education? To answer this question, we gave each institution at each year a score on each of the four factor scales, reflecting the similarity of its curriculum to that factor. These factor-weighted indexes were then used as dependent variables in ordinary least squares regressions (see Table 2).

In our analysis, we used a standard set of institutional characteristics as independent variables. These variables measured control, size, age, financial well-being, racial and gender composition, and curricular emphasis. We identified three types of institutions by control: public, independent/non-profit, and religiously-affiliated. We used total enrollment as a measure of size. We used founding date as a measure of age. We used operating budget per student as a measure of financial well-being.

TABLE 2
Standardized Effects of Institutional Characteristics on General Education Cultural Models

	Traditional Liberal Arts										Core Distribution Area				
	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000			
Public	-.070	-.147+	.002	.093	.078	-.167	.432**	.394**	.313*	.283+	.279+	.130			
Private-Religious	.337***	.343***	.429***	.439***	.459***	.163	.219+	.274**	.221*	.094	.109	-.164			
Coastal	-.057	-.136*	-.091	-.111+	-.116+	-.061	-.063	-.058	-.018	-.034	.020	.074			
Enrollments in 1000s	-.059	-.058	-.065	-.064	-.025	-.076	-.018	.034	.025	-.095	-.173*	-.081			
Op. Bud/Student in 1000s	-.065	-.030	-.022	.005	-.002	-.038	.012	.076	.025	.067	.069	-.035			
Proportion Liberal Arts	-.021	.031	-.003	-.045	-.012	-.184*	-.053	.010	.050	-.117	.020	.004			
Age	-.012	.042	.057	.072	.011	-.002	.046	-.014	.011	.012	.013	-.051			
Gender Composition	-.031	.018	.016	.114	.103	.088	.026	-.087	-.150*	-.041	-.019	-.055			
Race Composition	-.027	-.091	-.022	-.070	-.086	-.054	.087	.048	.074+	.100	-.003	-.010			
<i>N</i>	246	250	250	248	246	255	246	250	250	248	246	255			
<i>R</i> ²	.186	.294	.239	.235	.244	.199	.131	.104	.076	.072	.033	.079			
<i>Adjusted R</i> ²	.155	.268	.210	.206	.215	.169	.098	.070	.042	.037	-.004	.045			

Notes: + = $p < 0.10$, * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < 0.001$.

Source: College Catalog Study Database.

TABLE 2 (Continued)
Standardized Effects of Institutional Characteristics on General Education Cultural Models

	Cultures and Ethics											
	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
Public	.184**	-.245	-.263	-.379**	-.206	-.388**	—	.035	-.119	-.127	-.152	.036
Private-Religious	.069	-.182	-.177	-.242*	.017	-.162	—	-.220	-.299+	-.410*	-.078	.096
Coastal	-.031	-.072	-.031	.049	-.003	-.097	—	.049	.014	-.014	.063	.050
Enrollments in 1000s	.014	.153+	.181**	.136+	.070	.189**	—	-.128+	-.129+	-.037	-.047	-.075
Op. Bud/Student in 1000s	-.104*	-.051	-.078	-.128+	-.046	-.149*	—	-.073+	-.042	-.054	-.017	.027
Proportion Liberal Arts	.087	.068	.176*	.050	.060	.019	—	-.282+	-.332*	-.180	-.176+	-.140
Age	.049	-.024	-.113+	.013	-.035	-.048	—	.103	.021	-.066	.002	.033
Gender Composition	-.034	-.036	-.071	.026	-.015	-.079+	—	.010	-.047	.006	-.066+	-.058
Race Composition	.124	.091	.060	.019	-.035	-.022	—	.117	.056	.023	.004	.026
<i>N</i>	246	250	250	248	246	255	—	250	250	248	246	255
<i>R</i> ²	.046	.052	.082	.068	.037	.079	—	.159	.137	.130	.041	.036
<i>Adjusted R</i> ²	.009	.016	.048	.032	.000	.045	—	.127	.104	.097	.004	.000

Notes: + = $p < 0.10$, * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < 0.001$. Regression Analysis was not conducted on the Civic/Utilitarian factor in 1975 due to the factor lacking coherence at that time.

Source: College Catalog Study Database.

We used an index combining historically black colleges and universities with percent minority enrollment to measure racial composition. We used an index combining women's colleges with percent female enrollment to measure gender composition. We used percent of degrees in arts and sciences (as opposed to occupational-professional fields) as a measure of curricular emphasis.¹⁰ (See Appendix A for detailed information about these independent variables.)

We expected that public institutions would show some affinity to the core distributions areas model, based on their early embrace of social and natural sciences (Nevins, 1962). We also expected that private colleges and universities would be more likely to adopt the traditional liberal arts or cultures and ethics model based on the historical significance of the arts and humanities in these institutions (Bell, 1966). We expected that institutions with high proportions of graduates in occupational-professional fields might show some affinity with the civic/utilitarian model (Brint, Riddle, Turk-Bicakci, & Levy, 2005). However, we held no expectation that institutional characteristics would be *strongly* aligned with particular general education models. Following the precepts of the new institutionalism, we expected that the most popular forms of general education would serve as models that a wide variety of colleges and universities could select, either to emulate admired institutions or to differentiate themselves from competitors (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The analysis supported our expectation of relatively weak relationships between institutional characteristics and the four most popular models of general education. We were able to explain between 15% and 20% of the variance in the traditional liberal arts factor scales in all years. By contrast, we were unable to explain more than 10% to 12% of the variance in the core distribution areas and civic/ utilitarian factor scales, and less still in the cultures and ethics scale. Thus, the popular models of general education appeal across institutional lines, rather than showing distinct affinities for particular types of institutions.

The significant associations we found in these data were in the expected directions. The idea of requiring considerable study in traditional liberal arts fields evidently continued to hold substantial appeal for many religiously-affiliated institutions, reflecting observations of higher education scholars that denominational colleges have the most traditional view of higher education (Jencks & Riesman, 1967, p. 492). In the early years of the study period, public institutions tended to adopt the core distributions areas form of general education, although this tendency weakened somewhat in the 1990s and especially in 2000. Institutional control was an influence too on preference for the cultures and ethics model. Independent, non-profit colleges and universities, the

reference category in these analyses, were more prone to adopt cultures and ethics. However, the net associations were not strong, and they were not consistent across all target years. We also found significant net associations with enrollment size on the cultures and ethics factor scale, perhaps reflecting the greater interest in diversity among administrators of large, heterogeneous campuses. Finally, although the strength of the relationship rises only to the $p < 0.10$ level, the civic/utilitarian model was most popular at institutions awarding a large proportion of baccalaureate degrees in occupational-professional rather than arts and sciences fields. Some vocationally-oriented institutions evidently used general education to hone business-related skills and values, rather than to broaden students' cultural horizons.

Forces and Agents of Change

Within the context of these persisting and quite different conceptions of general education, considerable change occurred in course requirements over time. In this section, we will explore the sources and agents of change, focusing on demands for greater accountability and demands for greater representation of women, minorities, and non-Western cultures in the undergraduate curriculum. We will argue that these demands were linked, respectively, to two deeper-lying social forces: the expansion and diversification of higher education, as interpreted by influential actors in the system.

The General Education "Crisis" of the 1970s

In 1977, a major report labeled general education a "disaster area" (Boyer & Kaplan, 1977, p. 11). Other reports followed (see Gaff, 1983). Major themes included the incoherence of the college curriculum in the wake of the openness and inclusiveness of the 1960s, and a feeling, particularly strong among conservatives, that what had been a common fund of "cultural literacy" was being lost as universities sought to serve every new area of knowledge and every new student taste (see, e.g., Bloom, 1987; Cheney, 1989; Hirsch, 1987). A frequent criticism during the period was that general education had become incoherent and that greater prescription would be necessary to reform general education (Gaff, 1983).¹¹

Many of the proposals that emerged in the 1980s focused on returning to traditions of liberal education. The proposals that demonstrated a more lasting influence, however, responded to one or both of two emerging interests in the field—one a demand for greater accountability for student performance and the other a demand for greater representation of groups outside the scope of most Western civilization courses.

Expansion, State Budgets, and Accountability

Accountability is a response of state legislatures and regional accrediting bodies to the perception that colleges and universities have not done enough to ensure that students are learning course materials and essential academic competencies, such as mathematics and English composition. This perception has often been influenced by the complaints of employers about the skill levels of their new employees (see, e.g., Business Higher Education Forum, 1997; Rosenbaum & Binder, 1987). Expansion is a backdrop to calls for increased accountability, because expansion brings more students to campus whose prior academic preparation is relatively weak and whose primary interests lie outside of academic life.

Expansion also requires higher levels of public and private support for higher education. Limitations on public expenditures represented the most direct influence on state-level interest in higher education performance. In the context of limited and unstable revenue bases and stiff competition for public dollars, state governments began to demand performance assessments in return for funding commitments (Alexander, 2000). These performance assessments, in turn, stimulated institutions to increase the number of courses they required in basic academic competency areas.

During the period of this study, the goal of accountability shifted from accounting for expenditures to demonstrating performance. By the mid-1970s, 20 states had introduced minimal competency testing for graduating seniors (Gilman, 1978). During the 1980s and 1990s, more than half of the states introduced some form of performance funding linked to outcomes assessments, and 13 directly linked annual funding to institutional performance measures (Burke & Serban, 1998).¹² More than half (56%) of chief academic officers surveyed by Ratcliff et al. (2001) indicated that state governing boards had influenced general education reform on their campuses. Most reported that state governing boards had encouraged a shift from course content to assuring competencies in academic skills areas.

Regional accrediting agencies also exercised an influence on general education for accountability purposes. Regional accrediting agencies have the capacity to require improvements in specific areas of institutional capacity and institutional effectiveness as a precondition for accreditation. The regional accrediting bodies varied in the extent to which they considered general education a concern and in their emphases about the desirable objectives of general education curricula. Standards for accreditation in the North Central Association, for example, focused on core distribution requirements in the arts, communication, computer

literacy, humanities, mathematics, natural sciences, and behavioral and social sciences (Lopez, 1999). By contrast, standards in the Middle States Commission focused on skills and abilities in oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, technological competency, and information literacy (Middle States Commission, 2002). In Ratcliff et al.'s (2001) survey of chief academic officers, 38% reported that accrediting agencies had influenced their general education requirements, with the most influence reported in the western and southern states.

Diversification and Representation

Efforts to increase representation of women and minorities in the general education curriculum represent a response of social movement organizations to the perception that college and university curricula privileged white men and de-emphasized the contributions of women and non-Whites (see, e.g., Bromwich, 1992; Gates, 1992; Nussbaum, 1997). Efforts to increase the representation of minorities and women in the curriculum began in the 1960s during the period of the Civil Rights and women's movements (see, e.g., Boxer, 1998; Rojas, 2007; Stimpson & Kessner Cob, 1986).

Philanthropic and non-profit advocacy organizations encouraged responses to diversification through curricular reform aimed at increasing the representation of women, minorities and non-Western cultures. Early philanthropic supporters for expanding cultural representation on college and university campuses included the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation (Shiao, 2005).

Beginning in the 1980s, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) became the most important advocacy group for incorporating the experiences of women, minorities, and non-Western cultures (see, e.g., Hall & Sandler, 1984; Moses, 1989). In the early 1990s, AAC&U began advocating the addition of courses on gender, diversity, and non-Western cultures to the general education curriculum (see, e.g., Cornwell & Stoddard, 1999; Musil, 1992). In the late 1990s, AAC&U began conducting a General Education Institute during the summer for 20 to 30 member institutions. The Institute teaches best practices for reforming general education as a vehicle for teaching about diversity and for promoting global social awareness. AAC&U also published several periodicals, including *Liberal Education*, the leading magazine in the field of general education. With nearly 700 member institutions by the end of the period, the organization saw itself as a "leading edge of change" whose goal was to "amplify what (it) sees in the field" (D. Humphreys, personal communication, April 12, 2008). In a

statement at the end of the period of our study, the AAC&U emphasized the importance of “using diversity to produce simultaneously a deeper appreciation of differences that matter and a stronger commitment to the unity that is essential to civil society” (Beckham, 2000, p. 2).

Course-Level Adaptations

To what extent did these forces and agents of change influence the structure and content of general education?¹³ To answer this question, we examined course-level trends between 1975 and 2000. We will report trends in the volume and prescription of requirements and trends in course content separately.

Trends in Volume and Prescription

Spurred by the Carnegie Foundation report of 1977, the National Endowment for the Humanities and several philanthropic foundations advocated strengthening the number of required courses and degree of prescription in general education (Gaff, 1983). To examine whether these efforts made a difference, we analyzed trends in the volume and level of prescription of general education requirements during the period.

Figures 1 and 2 present our findings. Consistent with the research of Toombs, Amey, & Chen (1991) and Ratcliff, Johnson, & Gaff (2004), we found a moderate increase—slightly more than five credit hours—in the average amount of required general education between 1975–76 and 2000–01. CCS data also showed a declining standard deviation in minimum hours of general education required, indicating that institutions were becoming more alike in the amount of general education they required. The standard deviation nevertheless remained large, at nearly 16 credit hours.

We also found moderately higher levels of prescription. The proportion of true requirements (non-zero minimums) increased during the period—from 60% of all requirements to 69% of all requirements. The standard deviation fell during the period from 34% to 27%, again indicating that institutions were becoming somewhat more alike, even as large gaps among them remained. Here, the greatest changes occurred between 1985 and 1990, with a nearly 3% increase in the proportion of true requirements to total requirements. Although most institutions were becoming more prescriptive during the period, many retained practices of allowing one of several fields to satisfy requirements, and a few institutions did not prescribe at all.

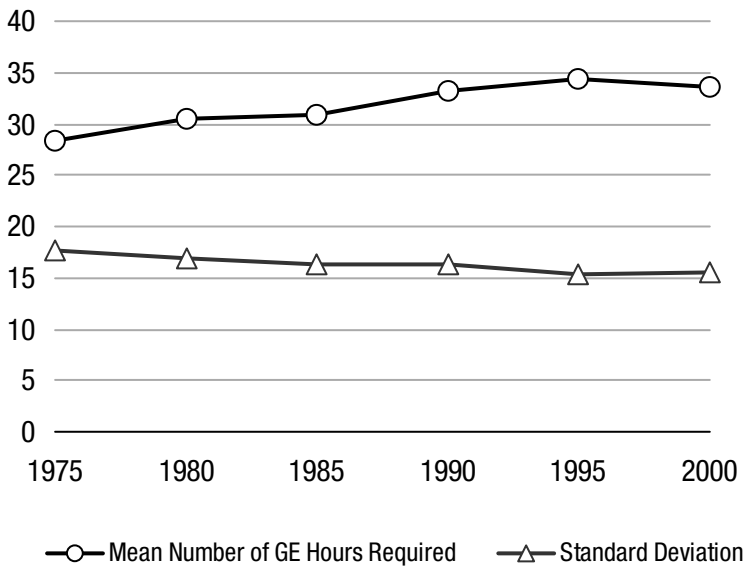


FIG. 1. Mean Number of General Education Requirements 1975–2000
 Source: College Catalog Study database

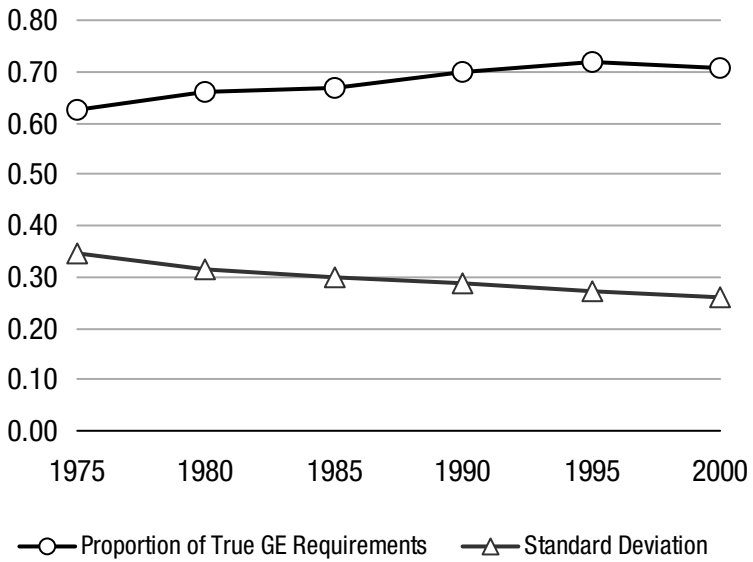


FIG. 2. Mean Proportion of True General Education Requirements 1975–2000
 Source: College Catalog Study database

Trends in Course Content

Spurred by expanded enrollments and limited revenues, state governments and regional accrediting agencies required learning outcomes assessments during the period of our study. Influenced by diversification of enrollments and social movement organizations, philanthropic foundations and advocacy organizations encouraged increased representation of previously marginal groups in the undergraduate curriculum. To examine whether these interests made a difference, we analyzed trends in general education course content during the period.

Table 3 presents our findings. The most notable gains during the period came in basic academic skills courses (mathematics, English composition, speech/communications, and foundations) and in diversity-related and non-Western cultures courses.¹⁴ Six of the nine fast-growing courses during the period were in these areas.

TABLE 3
Percentages of General Education Requirements and Ranked General Education Requirement Changes from 1975–2000 (*N* = 292)

GE Requirement	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	Total Change 1975–2000
Math	18.8 (55)	24.7 (72)	33.2 (97)	38.0 (111)	44.9 (131)	47.6 (139)	+28.8 (+84)
World Cultures	2.4 (7)	5.5 (16)	6.9 (20)	12.3 (36)	18.5 (54)	20.9 (61)	+18.5 (+54)
Arts	19.9 (58)	24.0 (70)	26.4 (77)	32.9 (96)	37.0 (108)	37.7 (110)	+17.8 (+52)
Diversity	2.1 (6)	2.4 (7)	3.8 (11)	6.9 (20)	14.0 (41)	17.8 (52)	+15.8 (+46)
English Composition	20.2 (59)	24.0 (70)	26.7 (78)	31.2 (91)	33.9 (99)	34.9 (102)	+14.7 (+43)
History	10.3 (30)	14.0 (41)	17.1 (50)	20.6 (60)	21.2 (62)	22.6 (66)	+12.3 (+36)
Speech/Communications	17.5 (51)	19.9 (58)	23.6 (69)	25.7 (75)	29.1 (85)	28.4 (83)	+11.0 (+32)
Ethics	1.0 (3)	2.7 (8)	4.1 (12)	5.5 (16)	7.9 (23)	9.6 (28)	+8.6 (+25)
Foundations	2.7 (8)	4.1 (12)	6.2 (18)	5.8 (17)	7.9 (23)	10.3 (30)	+7.5 (+22)
Western Culture	1.0 (3)	3.1 (9)	6.5 (19)	8.6 (25)	9.6 (28)	8.2 (24)	+7.2 (+21)
Critical Thinking	2.4 (7)	3.4 (10)	5.1 (15)	5.8 (17)	8.6 (25)	9.6 (28)	+7.2 (+21)
Natural Sciences	45.6 (133)	48.6 (142)	52.7 (154)	55.5 (162)	55.1 (161)	52.40 (153)	+6.9 (+20)
Computer Science	0.30 (1)	0.30 (1)	2.1 (6)	5.5 (16)	6.5 (19)	7.2 (21)	+6.9 (+20)

TABLE 3 (Continued)
 Percentages of General Education Requirements and Ranked General Education Requirement Changes from 1975–2000 (N = 292)

GE Requirement	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	Total Change 1975–2000
Freshman Seminar	3.4 (10)	3.4 (10)	2.7 (8)	6.2 (18)	9.6 (28)	9.9 (29)	+6.5 (+19)
American Culture	3.4 (10)	5.1 (15)	5.1 (15)	7.2 (21)	9.6 (28)	9.6 (28)	+6.2 (+18)
Senior Seminar	0.68 (2)	1.0 (3)	2.1 (6)	3.4 (10)	4.8 (14)	6.2 (18)	+5.5 (+16)
Contemporary Issues	0.3 (1)	1.4 (4)	2.1 (6)	3.1 (9)	5.1 (15)	5.5 (16)	+5.1 (+15)
Tech/Applied Science	0.3 (1)	1.4 (4)	2.1 (6)	3.1 (9)	4.5 (13)	4.8 (14)	+4.5 (+13)
Interdisciplinary Studies	2.4 (7)	2.1 (6)	2.7 (8)	4.5 (13)	5.5 (16)	5.8 (17)	+3.4 (+10)
English Literature	26.7 (78)	28.1 (82)	30.1 (88)	30.1 (88)	31.2 (91)	29.8 (87)	+3.1 (+9)
Social Sciences	63.4 (185)	66.8 (195)	67.5 (197)	69.2 (202)	69.2 (202)	65.75 (192)	+2.4 (+7)
Philosophy	9.6 (28)	10.3 (30)	9.6 (28)	12.0 (35)	13.0 (38)	11.6 (34)	+2.1 (+6)
Foreign Languages	20.6 (60)	21.6 (63)	21.9 (64)	23.0 (67)	23.6 (69)	22.3 (65)	+1.7 (+5)
Business	1.4 (4)	2.7 (8)	2.1 (6)	2.7 (8)	3.1 (9)	2.7 (8)	+1.4 (+4)
Government	1.0 (3)	0.7 (2)	0.7 (2)	1.0 (3)	1.7 (5)	1.4 (4)	+0.03 (+1)
Humanities	36.6 (107)	34.6 (101)	37.7 (110)	39.0 (114)	39.4 (115)	36.6 (107)	0.0 (0)
Physical Sciences	0.70 (2)	1.4 (4)	1.0 (3)	1.7 (5)	1.0 (3)	0.0 (0)	-0.7 (-2)
Religion	16.8 (49)	15.8 (46)	15.4 (45)	15.1 (44)	14.7 (43)	15.4 (45)	-1.4 (-4)
Physical Education	44.2 (129)	44.2 (129)	42.5 (124)	44.2 (129)	41.4 (121)	39.7 (116)	-4.5 (-13)

Notes: The number of cases are presented in parentheses.

Source: College Catalog database.

Aware of weaknesses in the preparation of their students and responsive to the concerns of state legislatures and regional accrediting bodies, nearly 30% of the colleges and universities in our sample required mathematics courses for the first time during the period and nearly 15% required English composition courses for the first time. Aware of the changing socio-demographic composition of their student bodies and encouraged by the funding of philanthropic foundations and the advocacy of non-profit organizations like the AAC&U, nearly 20% of the

colleges and universities in our sample required non-Western cultures courses for the first time during the period and more than 15% required diversity-related courses for the first time.

Discussion

In our discussion of the results of our research, we will summarize the contribution of our study to the scholarship on general education, and we will comment on the implications of our analysis for institutional theory. We will also discuss the future prospects for general education in light of our findings.

Our study makes four contributions to the study of general education. First, we identified four popular models of general education that persisted during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Second, we showed that external actors helped to shape general education through their advocacy of required courses in basic academic skills, diversity, and non-Western cultures. Third, we linked effective advocacy to deeper underlying changes in higher education resulting from the expansion and diversification of higher education enrollments, as interpreted by influential actors in the system. Fourth, we showed that change at the course level was entirely compatible with continuing differences in institutional commitments to a distinctive model of general education.

General Education and Institutional Theory

Our study has implications for studies of organizational change and particularly for the new institutionalism in organizational studies. The new institutionalism has opened up novel and illuminating ways of understanding convergence in organizational fields where selection pressures based on market or technical incentives do not exist. Against the classical Weberian model of rational-legal bureaucracy, the new institutionalism has emphasized that dominant forms of organization in many fields of social life are entirely unproven for their technical superiority over possible alternative forms of organization. The new institutionalism has emphasized the emergence of dominant models in organizational fields, rooted in ideals of progress and justice found in the Western cultural account (Meyer et al., 1987). It has emphasized that organizations have incentives to conform to these dominant models for purposes of maintaining legitimacy with order-affirming “ritual categories” and “rational myths” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The insights of the new institutionalism have been applied to the diffusion of a wide variety of phenomena in modern society, ranging from gay rights (Frank & McEneaney, 1999) to environmental protection laws (Frank,

Hironaka, & Schofer, 2000) to affirmative action in corporate personnel offices (Dobbin & Sutton, 1998). Its influence on studies of educational institutions has been particularly profound and far-reaching (see Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Stevens, Armstrong, & Arum, 2008).

General education provides an instructive case for examining gaps in the new institutionalism. In many ways, general education would seem to be an ideal candidate for analysis using the tools of the new institutionalism. It is a more or less pure example of an “institutional” as opposed to a “technical” element of organization (Meyer, 1977) in that it is an important ritual category in American colleges and universities, but one that few would argue is essential to the purely business or technical operations of the university (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Moreover, its continuation is taken-for-granted in virtually every higher education institution. No field-level agency exists to compel institutions to adopt particular sets of general education requirements; yet course requirements in general education are far from random or unstructured.

We have argued that general education models, once well-established, become available for adoption by a wide range of organizations in a field. We have shown that links between these models and their original organizational homes can become attenuated, or even disappear. In this respect, our argument is consistent with the new institutionalism. However, unlike the new institutionalism, we have shown that models embraced by influential actors in the field do not necessarily replace, or even partially replace, existing models. Instead, in highly decentralized and loosely-controlled organizational fields, where costs for non-compliance are low, organizations can select among competing models without penalty. In our case, these models have had diverse origins, rooted in status cultures (as in the case of the traditional liberal arts model), organizational compromises (as in the case of the core distribution areas model), and a combination of political compulsion and labor market incentives (as in the case of civic/utilitarian model).¹⁵

At the course level, we also do not see convergence. Instead, organizations responded to a variety of pressures in their environments. Much of the change depended on voluntary compliance due to perceptions that the solutions being offered by external actors could help to solve perceived deficiencies in current practices. Pressures for adding basic academic skills courses have been prevalent in general education, but the impact of these pressures has varied depending on the strength and interests of state legislatures (Alexander, 2000; Burke & Serban, 1998; National Center for Education Statistics, 1996) and regional accrediting bodies (Lopez, 1999; Middle States Commission, 2002), as well as the judgments of institutional leaders about the interests and needs of their

students. Similarly, pressures for adding more courses on diversity and non-Western cultures were prevalent in general education, but these pressures also varied in impact depending on the ties between institutions and advocacy organizations, pressures on campus to add these requirements, and the priorities of institutional leaders (see Boxer, 1998; Rojas, 2007; Stimpson & Kessner Cob, 1986).

Many trends in higher education can be explained by incentives for emulating dominant models, just as the new institutionalism has argued. In these cases, legitimacy can be an important incentive for compliance. At the same time, the new institutionalism has tended to overlook cases of non-convergence, like general education, in which institutions have no strong incentives to comply with dominant models and in which many actors are competing for influence in the field. These cases are not trivial in number, and their importance as organizational facts may not be trivial in every instance either. Insofar as cases of non-convergence are frequent but not always important, our analysis should be seen as more than a footnote to the new institutionalism, but also less than a direct challenge to it.

Our findings are, in some respects, more consistent with the precepts of the old institutionalism than with those of the new institutionalism. The old institutionalism emphasized that deeply-engrained structures and practices in organizations were typically rooted in value commitments; leaders maintained these forms and practices because they believed in their value and, moreover, good leaders appealed to these values on relevant occasions in order to sustain and strengthen commitments to organizational structures and processes (Selznick, 1957). At the same time, the old institutionalism emphasized that institutional forms and practices were subject to change based on new economic circumstances and the mobilization of political interests in the environment (Selznick, 1953). Thus, the old institutionalism studied cases like the Tennessee Valley Authority in which external elites transformed the agency over time from providing electrical power to poor farmers to assisting in a broad range of regional economic development activities (*ibid.*). The old institutionalism was marked as well by its grounding in historical documentary materials as sources for understanding trajectories of organizational change.

Certainly, the values of educators and the mobilization of external actors figure prominently in our case. The historical evidence suggests that general education has been strongly tied to educators' commitments to the humanizing value of non-utilitarian subjects, as well as to value-laden conceptions of the qualities of mind demanded for full engagement with the issues of the day (Bell, 1966; Harvard University, 1945;

Miller, 1988). The sometimes emotional battles between advocates of Western civilization and advocates of non-Western cultures suggest that deeply-held values continued to play an important role in the reconstitution of general education requirements during the period of our study (see, e.g. Allardyce, 1988; Nussbaum, 1997). Moreover, as we have shown, influential external actors exercised an important influence on changes in general education requirements during the period of the study. We have based much of our analysis on statistical methods, but, in the tradition of the old institutionalism, we have also relied on historical documentary materials to understand the origins and trajectories of general education philosophies and models.

However, our work is also not entirely consistent with the precepts of the old institutionalism either. In the first place, our unit of analysis is the entire organizational field of four-year colleges and universities. This stands as a distinct contrast with the case study approach favored in the old institutionalism and places us, in this respect, closer to the field-level inquiries of the new institutionalism. Second, we have emphasized the persistence of multiple competing models within the organizational field. This too stands in contrast to the emphasis of the old institutionalism, which focused, like the new institutionalism, on the emergence of new dominant forms and practices. Third, in the context of multiple competing models, our evidence strongly suggests that changes through accretion can be as important cumulatively as the rise of new models (on this theme, see also Gumport, 2002). We have therefore emphasized both slow accretions of new curricular elements, as well as higher-level transformations, such as the rise during the period of the cultures and ethics and civic/utilitarian models. By contrast, the old institutionalism, like the new, focused on major transformations and tended to ignore gradual accretions of change elements (cf. Scott, Reuf, Mendel, & Caronna, 2000). Finally, we have emphasized the importance of measuring change—and therefore the influence of change agents—at multiple levels of organizational structure. We analyzed change at three levels: first, in relation to the rise of new underlying models of general education; second, in relation to the volume and level of prescription of required courses; and third, in relation to the growth and decline of specific required courses. By contrast, both the old and the new institutionalism focus, more or less exclusively, on cultural elements closely connected to major transformations in which they are interested.

The comparative value of our approach will depend on characteristics of specific cases under investigation. For field-level studies of convergence around new dominant models, the key ideas of the new institutionalism will continue to be of great importance. At the same time, we

believe cases of non-convergence, like the one we have analyzed, represent important opportunities for the development of institutional theory. In such cases, the perspective of social and institutional history will continue to be important for understanding the crystallization of competing models. The tools of political analysis will continue to be important, as well, for understanding the strength of interest groups, the means by which they seek to implement their favored policies, and the locations in the organizational field in which they are likely to have greatest influence (see also Brint & Karabel, 1991; Dobbin & Sutton, 1998; Fligstein, 1996, 2001). Although we lack the data to show it in the case of general education, we think it likely that the tools of network analysis will prove to be important as well, particularly for understanding the migration of the various competing models to new locations in the organizational field (cf. Djelic & Amdan, 2007).

The Future of General Education

Slow change was more apparent in our data than rapid transformations. Two very old conceptions of general education—core distribution areas and traditional liberal arts—persisted throughout the period of our study. Two newer conceptions—cultures and ethics and civic/utilitarian preparation—rose at the beginning of the period of our study and persisted throughout the period. Most of the change we observed occurred at the course level. Over the 25-year period of our study, the most important actors in the system focused on increasing the number and level of prescription in general education courses; on ensuring that students have strong foundations in the core skills areas of mathematics, English composition, and speech; and on broadening the representation of women, minorities, and non-Western cultures in required courses. In so far as these actors continue to be influential, we can expect continued incremental additions of courses related to basic academic competencies, diversity, and non-Western cultures.

The guild interests of faculty strongly mitigate against wholesale changes in general education. Where general education is based on distribution requirements, any major change to requirements can be seen as a threat by faculty members in departments that enroll few majors. Because faculty perceive that high enrollments are necessary to avoid the possibility of non-replacement of departing colleagues, departments are strongly oriented to maintaining enrollments in the service courses they offer for non-majors. These service courses typically satisfy general education breadth requirements. This issue is particularly pertinent to faculty members in the humanities, but increasingly, faculty members in some natural science departments (such as physics, chemistry, and

mathematics) also attract relatively few majors (Brint et al., 2005) and may feel similar imperatives.

In spite of these guild interests, it is possible that the spirit of the original general education movement could be revived in the future in a new form. In the face of recurring demands for coherence in the undergraduate curriculum, the seeming incoherence of the breadth requirements produces a constant, if low-grade, sense of dissatisfaction among college and university educators. This dissatisfaction regularly leads to proposals for reform of general education.

In recent years, these proposals have included, most notably, the introduction of thematic “bundles” of courses to provide perspectives on such important issues as race relations, environmental sustainability, energy and society, and terrorism (Carnegie Foundation, 2008; University of California Commission on General Education, 2007). A number of universities have experimented successfully with this approach. It is possible that the new wave of thematically bundled courses will provide a way to bridge the guild interests of department-based faculty while harkening to the spirit of the original general education movement by encouraging a confrontation between knowledge drawn from many disciplines and issues of great moment.

APPENDIX A
Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mode	Percent
<i>Independent Variables</i>							
Public	292	0.46	0.5	0	1	0	46%
Religious Private School	292	0.28	0.45	0	1	0	28%
Coastal	292	0.4	0.49	0	1	0	40%
Enrollment in 1,000s							
1975	288	7.88	9.65	0.21	60.13	—	—
1980	289	7.96	9.47	0.17	54.53	—	—
1985	290	8.08	9.47	0.26	53.20	—	—
1990	290	8.85	10.04	0.28	54.09	—	—
1995	290	8.83	9.77	0.31	48.68	—	—
2000	292	9.17	10.21	0.37	51.39	—	—

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	Mode	Percent
Operating Budget/Student in 1,000s							
1975	284	4.66	4.08	0.989	34.90	—	—
1980	287	7.13	6.74	1.26	65.79	—	—
1985	288	11.30	10.09	2.22	77.49	—	—
1990	288	16.16	15.35	3.32	111.32	—	—
1995	288	21.05	19.66	3.63	120.73	—	—
2000	292	24.45	24.89	3.42	175.51	—	—
Proportion of Degrees Liberal Arts							
1975	282	0.54	0.26	0	1	—	—
1980	287	0.49	0.26	0	1	—	—
1985	288	0.43	0.26	0	1	—	—
1990	286	0.43	0.27	0	1	—	—
1995	292	0.5	0.25	0.05	1	—	—
2000	292	0.49	0.25	0	1	—	—
Age of Institution							
1975	292	90.47	48.33	-13.00	339	—	—
1980	292	95.47	48.33	-8.00	344	—	—
1985	292	100.47	48.33	-3.00	349	—	—
1990	292	105.47	48.33	2.00	354	—	—
1995	292	110.47	48.33	7.00	359	—	—
2000	292	115.47	48.33	12.00	364	—	—
Gender Composition							
1975	253	0	1	-2.20	5.00	—	—
1980	253	0	1	-2.20	5.00	—	—
1985	253	0	1	-2.38	5.07	—	—
1990	254	0	1	-2.63	5.14	—	—
1995	248	0	1	-2.87	5.17	—	—
2000	255	0	1	-3.08	5.25	—	—
Racial Composition							
1975	253	0	1	-0.532	5.95	—	—
1980	253	0	1	-0.532	5.95	—	—
1985	253	0	1	-0.549	5.90	—	—
1990	254	0	1	-0.632	5.89	—	—
1995	248	0	1	-0.754	5.61	—	—
2000	255	0	1	-0.821	5.52	—	—
Dependent Variables							
Traditional Liberal Arts							
1975	292	-0.075	0.947	-1.22	2.98	—	—
1980	292	-0.060	0.943	-1.95	2.71	—	—
1985	292	-0.074	0.941	-1.62	3.18	—	—
1990	292	-0.092	0.951	-1.54	3.11	—	—
1995	292	-0.098	0.955	-1.82	2.95	—	—
2000	292	-0.125	0.949	-1.75	4.47	—	—

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	Mode	Percent
Core Distribution Areas							
1975	292	-0.061	0.996	-2.39	1.84	—	—
1980	292	-0.027	0.995	-3.37	1.42	—	—
1985	292	-0.013	0.998	-2.24	1.71	—	—
1990	292	-0.045	0.989	-2.35	1.80	—	—
1995	292	-0.017	0.947	-4.07	1.90	—	—
2000	292	-0.014	0.970	-3.08	2.12	—	—
Cultures and Ethics							
1975	292	0.004	1.05	-1.58	9.41	—	—
1980	292	0.051	1.02	-1.95	6.67	—	—
1985	292	0.081	1.03	-1.63	5.78	—	—
1990	292	0.038	1.02	-1.51	4.43	—	—
1995	292	-0.016	1.00	-1.92	4.26	—	—
2000	292	-0.003	0.997	-1.40	5.33	—	—
Business/Technical							
1975	292	-0.011	1.02	-9.12	4.86	—	—
1980	292	-0.093	0.914	-1.69	5.34	—	—
1985	292	-0.085	0.895	-1.51	5.30	—	—
1990	292	-0.039	0.867	-2.15	6.89	—	—
1995	292	-0.047	0.877	-1.34	7.08	—	—
2000	292	-0.054	0.877	-1.64	7.05	—	—

Notes: For the factor items loading in each dependent variable, see Table 3.

Source: College Catalog Study database.

Notes

¹As Miller writes: “Liberal education, founded on rationalist assumptions, oriented toward essentialism, and based in the methods of logic, is concerned with ideas in the abstract, with the conservation of universal truths handed down through the years, and with the development of the intellect. General education, founded on instrumentalist assumptions, oriented toward existentialism, and based in psychological methods, is concerned with the problems of the present and the future, and with the development of the individual. The differences between the two are fundamental.” (Miller, 1988, p. 183)

²By the later 1970s, some higher education scholars were comfortable identifying general education simply as “the breadth component of the undergraduate curriculum”

(Levine, 1978) in spite of notable intellectual efforts throughout the post-World War II period to revive general education as a progressive cultural movement for the integration of knowledge around contemporary concerns (see, e.g., Bell, 1966; Jencks & Riesman, 1967, pp. 492–504).

³By 2000, requirements in mathematics and arts were more common than requirements in humanities, and requirements in English composition were nearly as common. In addition, courses in English literature, history, foreign languages, and ethics also grew in importance. This suggests a decomposition of the general humanities requirement into more specific required fields.

⁴The extent of flux is suggested by the fact that only 16% of more than 1750 observations over the period of 25 years included institutions that had exactly the same set of requirements or differed by only one requirement. The most frequent perfect matches (73 observations) identified institutions with no general education requirements at all.

⁵We obtained catalogs from CollegeSource, Inc. of San Diego, CA.

⁶Thirty-one percent of all course requirements in our sample were “optional requirements.” In the vast majority of these cases, optional requirements consisted of lists of subjects from which students could choose one to satisfy a requirement. In a small number of cases a course had a zero minimum because students were allowed to pass out of the course by examination or on the basis of previous work. These latter cases were found most often in foreign language classes.

⁷The CCS sample does not include specialized institutions (e.g., business colleges, art schools, or seminaries). The CCS sample also does not include private, for-profit colleges and universities. Weighted data thus represent the population of comprehensive, public and non-profit four-year colleges and universities only.

⁸For this reason, we excluded the civic/utilitarian factor for 1975–76 from the regression analysis reported in Table 2.

⁹Although the factors were not completely stable throughout the period, the first three clearly show enough stability in their defining courses to be considered popular models of general education. In our view, the civic/utilitarian model, although less stable than these first three, is stable enough in broad outline from 1980 on to be considered a fourth popular model.

¹⁰We were unable to use some standard institutional characteristics (such as Carnegie class and average SATs of freshmen) because of problems of multi-collinearity. Average SATs were, in particular, highly correlated ($r = 0.8$) with operating budget per student.

¹¹This theme was expressed by the most important actors in the field during the period, including the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the Exxon Foundation, the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, and the National Endowment for the Humanities (see Gaff, 1983).

¹²An inventory of state higher education accountability policies can be found in National Center for Education Statistics (1996).

¹³Previous research confirms that general education experienced a decline in prescription during the 1950s and 1960s (Blackburn et al., 1976; Dressel DeLisle, 1969), and an increase in prescription thereafter (Johnson et al., 2004; Toombs et al., 1991).

¹⁴Of the well represented subjects in 1975, only religion and physical education showed significant declines during the period. This suggests that institutions felt increasingly uncomfortable mandating physical fitness at a time when recreational alternatives became widely available for both sexes and increasingly uncomfortable mandating spiritual reflection at a time when religion’s influence on the college curriculum was ebbing (see Marsden, 1994; Reuben, 1996).

¹⁵Our results show multiple competing models; other commentators on the new institutionalism have focused on the competition between market-responsive models of organization against older status-based forms of organization (cf. Djelic & Amdan, 2007; Gumport, 2002; Kraatz & Zajac, 1996).

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