General Education Genres:
The Changing Meanings of Liberal Education in American Colleges and Universities, 1975-2000

Steven Brint, Kristopher Proctor, Scott P. Murphy, Lori Turk-Bicakci, and Robert A. Hanneman

University of California, Riverside

November 2007
Revised: February 2008

Abstract

Analysis of college catalogs over a 25-year period for nearly 300 institutions shows modestly higher volumes of general education requirements, greater prescription, and virtually no standardization. Within this context, factor analysis reveals a handful of relatively popular “genres” of general education: “traditional liberal arts,” “core distribution areas,” “cultures and ethics,” and “business/technical.”

In spite of its prominence in U.S. higher education as compared to systems in other advanced industrial countries, general education (GE) remains, in many respects, a step-child, less important to most professors than upper-division courses in the major fields, and less important in doctoral-granting institutions than graduate programs. Often criticized for lack of structure and cohesiveness (see, e.g., Boyer and Kaplan 1977; Cheney 1989; Gaff 1983; NAS 1996), general education has become a frequent object of reform efforts by administrators and faculty who see improvements as a way to help re-invigorate the lower-division (see, e.g., Gaff 1983; Gaff and Wasescha 1991). These efforts have led to important changes on many campuses, but, as we will show, they have not produced a new dominant model of general education.

In this study, we describe changes in general education over a 25-year period ending in 2000-1. Our first set of research questions follow from previous research: (1) Are general education requirements increasing or decreasing? (2) Which subjects are becoming more and less often required? and (3) Is prescription growing or declining? We add three previously neglected research questions: (4) Do higher education institutions hold distinctively different conceptions of liberal education? (5) If so, what
are these different conceptions? and (6) Do particular types of institutions show an
affinity for one or the other of these different conceptions?

Previous research showed that GE courses became less numerous and became
increasingly organized as “distribution requirements” during the period 1957 through
1974. Thus, Dresell and DeLisle (1969), using data collected from college catalogs from
322 institutions in 1956-7 and 1966-7, found more subjects becoming optional during the
period, with the exceptions of foreign languages and mathematics. Blackburn et al.
(1976), using data collected through surveys and student transcripts from 271 institutions
in 1966-7 and 1973-4 found every subject they studied (English composition, foreign
languages, mathematics, and physical education) becoming less often required over time.
GE requirements tightened somewhat after the mid-1970s. Using Blackburn et al.’s data
for 1966-7 and 1973-4 and new data from college catalogs of 652 institutions in 1988-9,
Toombs, Amey, and Chen (1991) found the proportion of general education to total
credits necessary for graduation to be increasing. Toombs, Amey, and Chen (1991) also
found speech and mathematics increasingly required, and foreign languages and physical
education less often required in the later period. Based on surveys of administrators at
478 baccalaureate-granting institutions, Johnson, Ratcliff, and Gaff (2004) found
increasing prescription during the period 1988-9 through 1999-2000 and foreign
languages, mathematics, and physical education becoming increasingly required.

Our study is important, first, because of its methodological improvements over
previous work. We use the same coding conventions across a 25-year period for the
same set of 292 institutions. Because of our panel design, our constant coding
conventions, and our fixed set of institutions, we can claim a higher level of accuracy
than previous studies, and we are therefore in a position to resolve the contradictory results of previous research. Second, we investigate a wider range of subjects, showing patterns of growth and decline in subjects, such as world cultures and diversity-related fields, previously unstudied in large, representative samples of institutions. Third, our study adds consideration of the different conceptions of general education that exist in American colleges and universities during the period. Because general education requirements are the principal mechanism colleges and universities have for promulgating their conceptions of liberal education, it is important to know whether these conceptions differ significantly across institutions and, if so, in what ways. This topic has not been explored in previous research.

**DATA AND METHODS**

The data for this study come from a unique data set, the College Catalog Study (CCS). CCS is an archive of data on academic organization derived from coding of college catalogs over a 25-year period, 1975-6 through 2000-1.¹ Catalogs were coded at five year intervals for six target years: 1975-6, 1980-1, 1985-6, 1990-1, 1995-6, and 2000-1. CCS is linked to a larger data archive, the Institutional Data Archive (IDA) on American higher education. 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: (1) highly selective liberal arts colleges and research universities, (2) other selective liberal arts colleges and doctoral universities, (3)
masters’-granting universities, and (4) other baccalaureate granting institutions. CCS institutions are a subset of the 385 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 (reference masked).

Institutions vary between semester and quarter systems and in their computation of general education by courses, units, hours, and credits. We converted all quarter units to semester units using the following convention: We assume 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 assume 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.

In this paper, we will first present trend data on the growth of required subjects in American colleges and universities. In this analysis, we use a 29-category scheme to capture all fields that appeared at least ten times over the entire period. We will then present trend data on changes in the structure of general education. We will focus on three dimensions of structure: (1) volume of courses required, (2) amount of prescription, and (3) degree of standardization across institutions. We measure volume by changes in the mean number of credits required and the standard deviation of credits required over the period. We measure prescription by changes in the proportion of “true requirements” (non-zero minimums) to “optional requirements” (zero minimums) over time. We measure standardization by changes over time in the co-occurrence of exactly the same requirements or in requirements that are exactly the same, except for one difference. To analyze standardization, we use the “nearest neighbor” clustering algorithm. All institutions that appear in clusters at the first stage of aggregation identify exactly the same set of requirements. Those that join at the second stage of analysis differ from their nearest neighbor by only one requirement.

In the next analysis, we move from consideration of structural change to the identification of the content cores of the most popular conceptions of general education. For this purpose, we use principle components analysis. While completely isomorphic requirements are extremely rare across institutions, many institutions do gravitate to a handful of general education “genres.” For the purposes of this paper, by “genre” we mean a set of core requirements that are distinguishing from other sets of core
requirements and that, in addition, express a distinct underlying orientation to general education. These genres are discoverable empirically through the use of principle component 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 incorporate 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 (3) the subjects was specifically required. This coding scheme allows us for greater precision in the factor analysis than a dichotomous choice between required or not required would allow. Not every institution aligned with a particular general education genre include each one of the core subjects defining that genre, but enough do that a core set of subjects emerges in the principle components analysis as the central defining features of the genre. 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: (1) the Kaiser criterion (i.e. eigenvalues greater than one); (2) 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 (3) 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. Thus, we define popular genres of general education as those that account for the most variance in the structure of course category
groupings across time and, at the same time, present a broadly consistent content profile across time.

In our last analysis, we use ordinary least squares regression to investigate the extent to which institutional characteristics predict adoption of one or another of these four genres. These analyses use a standard battery of institutional characteristics as independent variables and factor-weighted scales identifying each of the four genres as dependent variables.

In the factor analysis and regression analyses, weighted results are presented 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. The results for changes in specific courses required were not weighted, however, because we feared the potential for misrepresentation of trends in subjects that were only rarely part of general education requirements. The results on standardization of requirements were also not weighted, because, by definition, the patterns we find are specific to our sample.

RESULTS

Trends in Required Subjects

Table 1 reports trends in subjects included as general education requirements over time. Only “true requirements” (non-zero minimums) are reported.
The most popular subjects of general education requirements are in the broad categories of natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Unlike some previous studies, we show no declines in the representation of natural or social sciences in our sample institutions (cf. Ratcliff, Johnson, and Gaff 2004). During the period, humanities were not required with the same frequency as natural sciences and social sciences. By 2000, requirements in mathematics and arts were more common than requirements in humanities, and requirements in English composition were nearly as common.

Insert Table 1 Here

The most notable gains over time were in basic academic and social skill areas (English composition, speech/communications, mathematics, and foundations) and global social awareness areas (world cultures, and racial-ethnic and gender diversity). These findings are striking; they suggest that American college and university leaders have grown increasingly concerned about students’ basic skills and have also wanted to expose students to a broader range of cultures than they once emphasized (see, e.g., Frank, Schofer and Torres 1994; Levine and Cureton 1992). During the period, courses in English literature, history, foreign languages, and ethics also grew in importance, while requirements in the general category of humanities remained stable. This suggests a decomposition of the humanities into more specific required fields. Of the well represented subjects in 1975, only religion and physical education showed notable declines during the period.
Trends in Structure

Our analysis of the structure of general education focuses on changes in volume (mean number of credits required and the standard deviation of credits required); prescription (changes in the proportion of true requirements to optional requirements); and standardization (changes in the number of institutions with the same or very similar requirements).

Volume. Consistent with Toombs, Amey, and Chen (1991) and Ratcliff, Johnson, and Gaff (2004), we find a moderate increase in the number of hours of required general education between 1975-6 and 2000-1 -- by an average of more than five hours over the period of the study. The data also show a declining standard deviation in minimum hours of general education required, indicating that institutions are becoming more alike in the amount of general education they require. The standard deviation nevertheless remains large, at nearly 16 hours. Our data indicate further that the mean number of hours of required general education increased from 1975 through 1995 before declining slightly between 1995 and 2000. These findings are consistent with previous research (Johnson, Ratcliff, and Gaff 2004).

Prescription. The proportion of true requirements (non-zero minimums) also increased moderately during the period -- from 60 percent of all requirements to 69 percent of all requirements. The standard deviation fell during the period from 34 percent to 27 percent, 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 three percent increase in the proportion of true requirements to total requirements. Although 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.

**Standardization.** Our analysis indicates that few institutions prescribed exactly the same set of general education requirements. Of the 1752 total observations (292 institutions over six target years), we found perfect matches in only 183 observations. Thus, 90 percent of observations show differences of at least one requirement from one another. The most frequent perfect matches (73 observations) identified institutions with no general education requirements at all. Additional institutions were joined at the second stage of aggregation. We found 103 (6 percent) cases of institutions whose general education requirements were exactly the same as those of another institution, except for one difference. Thus, cumulating over the six target years, 16 percent of the observations included institutions that were either exactly the same or differed by only one requirement. Standardization, measured in this way, as perfect and near matches, declined over time. In 1975, we found 90 cases of perfect or near matches. In 2000, we found only 22 cases of perfect or near matches.

**Genres of General Education**

Now that we have examined changes in the specific courses required, the number of courses required, the degree of prescription, and the extent of isomorphism, we turn to perhaps the most interesting question, and one that previous research has ignored, namely: Are different conceptions of general education common in American colleges and universities? To answer this question, we used principle components analysis to produce a profile of the most popular general education genres (see Table 2). It is
important to emphasize that this approach is entirely empirical; we had no preconceptions about either the number or content of general education genres.

The analysis yielded four factors that met our criteria for retention. In order of the amount of variation explained in the data, the first three factors can be described, respectively, as “traditional liberal arts,” “core distribution areas,” and “cultures and ethics.” These are the most popular generic forms of general education during the period. In each of the six target years, the traditional liberal arts factor included English literature, philosophy, history, religion, and arts. In most years, foreign languages also loaded on this factor. In each of the six target years, the core distribution areas factor included natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. In each of the target years, the cultures and ethics factor included world cultures, western culture, American culture, and ethics. The remaining factor described in Table 2 is not as consistently anchored in a core set of recurring subjects. However, in all years except 1975, the “business/technical” factor included subjects that produce skills valuable in business and applied technical careers. From 1980 on, business course requirements anchored this factor.

______________________________

Insert Table 2 Here

______________________________

As the data in Table 1 indicate, the most prevalent form of general education is one based on “core distribution areas.” These areas are typically natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Increasingly, mathematics has become part of this core of distribution requirements, and humanities may be weakening over time, with more specific required courses on English composition or literatures rising in some places to
take its place. Two other popular genres focus explicitly on liberal arts fields, rather than arts and sciences. The “traditional liberal arts” genre typically includes a course on religion, as well as English, history, philosophy, and foreign languages. The newer form of liberal arts education -- which focuses on understanding American and world cultures – typically includes a course on ethics. Thus, in these two generic forms we see two ways of combining traditional aims of liberal education, namely, intellectual broadening and moral reflection. By contrast, the “business/technical” genre makes clear that not all popular forms of general education reflect the philosophy of liberal education. Instead, general education is being used on some campuses to prepare students for the work world and to compensate for weak preparation in secondary education.

_Institutional Characteristics and General Education Genres_

A final question remains: Are particular types of institutions more likely to prefer one or another of these relatively 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 genre. These factor-weighted indexes were then used as dependent variables in ordinary least squares regressions (see Table 3).

In our explanatory model, we focused on a standard set of institutional variables related to 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. 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.\(^6\) (See Appendix A for detailed descriptions of independent variables.)

We expected that public institutions would show some affinity to the core distributions requirements genre, based on their land-grant traditions (Nevins 1962). We also expected that private colleges and universities would be more likely to adopt the “traditional liberal arts” or “cultures and ethics” genre based on the historical significance of the liberal arts in these institutions (Bell 1966). We expected that institutions with high proportions of graduates in occupational-professional fields might show some affinity with the “business/technical” genre (Brint et al. 2005). However, we had no expectation that institutional characteristics would be strongly aligned with particular general education genres. It seemed as likely to us that general education genres served as models that a wide variety of colleges and universities could select either to emulate admired institutions or to differentiate themselves from nearby competitors.

The analysis supported our expectation of relatively weak relationships between institutional characteristics and general education genres. We were able to explain between 15 and 20 percent 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 percent of the variance in the core distribution areas and business/technical factor scales, and less still in the cultures and ethics scale. Thus, most of the popular genres of general education appeal
across institutional lines, rather than showing distinct affinities for particular types of institutions.

____________________________

Insert Table 3 Here

____________________________

To a limited degree, institutional characteristics did matter, however. The idea of studying specific fields in the humanities evidently continues to hold substantial appeal for many religiously-affiliated institutions. 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 2000. Institutional control was an influence too on preference for the cultures and ethics genre of general education. 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 student bodies on large campuses. Finally, although the strength of the relationship rises only to the p<.10 level, the business/technical genre was most popular at institutions awarding most of their baccalaureate degrees in occupational-professional rather than arts and sciences fields. Instead offering a broadening curriculum through general education requirements, some vocationally-oriented institutions evidently use general education instead to hone business-related skills and values.
DISCUSSION

Are the data reported in this paper good or bad news for general education and, more specifically, for efforts to broaden students’ experience of the world through exposure to the liberal arts and sciences? The data suggest that general education is relatively healthy. The trend over time has been toward more requirements and more prescription. General education is also evolving in interesting ways; more institutions are requiring exposure to non-western cultures and more are focusing on basic skills building in the areas of English composition and mathematics. Liberal arts fields remain well represented and, in the cases of the arts, history, speech, and ethics, have become markedly better represented since the mid-1970s.

At the same time, general education remains highly fragmented. Although the number of courses and the amount of prescription is slowly rising, large standard deviations indicate that high levels of variability exist both in volume and degree of prescription. We have identified four popular genres of general education, but few institutions follow these models with perfect fidelity; instead, they adapt the models, adding and subtracting elements to respond to local interests. To one of the more popular models, institutions may, for example, decide to add (or drop) physical education, a senior capstone experience, or a required course in the arts.

In the remainder of this discussion section, we will present a provisional framework for understanding the sources of structure and the agents of change in general education requirements over the 25-year period.

Sources of Structure
Neo-institutional organizational theorists have often pointed to educational organizations as prototypes of non-technical institutions in which dominant cultural models tend to emerge and diffuse throughout a system as their legitimacy increases (see, e.g., Meyer and Rowan 1977; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). General education clearly defies the expectations of neo-institutional theory. Instead, general education requirements are better interpreted as market signals that institutions send to potential students. They tell potential students what kinds of educational values an institution has, and what kinds of educational experiences it considers important enough to require of all students.

At the same time, general education is not an entirely random selection of cultural elements. Liberal arts ideals, organizational sectors, and market segments provide more structure in this area than critics of the “incoherence” of general education allow.

The most important cultural commitment is that of college administrators and faculty to the idea that college students should be exposed to the liberal arts to broaden their horizons and as a protection against an overly vocational view of higher education. This cultural commitment is not found in most advanced industrial societies, where higher education is explicitly for career preparation and liberal education occurs not in higher education, but in secondary schooling (see Brint 2006: chap. 4).

As we have shown, institutional control is an influence on the adoption of specific content forms of general education. Religiously affiliated private colleges and universities show an affinity for the traditional liberal arts form, rooted in their traditionalist view of higher education (Marsden 1994). Public universities show an affinity for the core distribution areas form, rooted in their identities as comprehensive
institutions, attuned both to the arts and sciences, as well as applied subjects, and in their non-prescriptive origins as relatively open access institutions (Nevins 1962). Independent, private colleges and universities show an affinity, though a much weaker one, for the cultures and ethics form of general education, perhaps as a way of differentiating themselves from more traditionalist religiously-affiliated institutions and less prescriptive public institutions.

Market segmentation also matters, albeit, again, in a limited way. Some of the subjects that have been gaining ground in general education clearly reflect institutional perceptions that students entering the middle and lower ranks of four year colleges and universities require additional instruction in basic academic skill areas: written and oral expression and quantitative reasoning. Moreover, occupationally oriented institutions show an affinity for the business/technical form of general education; while larger institutions, which typically enroll a more diverse student body, show a weak affinity for the cultures and ethics genre.

Structural frames persist because entropy encourages marginal changes, rather than wholesale transformations. One important source of entropy is the commitment of higher education leaders to ideals of liberal education as understood through the distinct traditions described above. (As we have shown, some occupationally oriented institutions are an exception to this rule.) In addition to these cultural commitments, groups of faculty in the basic fields of arts and sciences retain strong vested interests in the perpetuation of existing forms of general education. The erosion of the number of degrees awarded in many of these basic fields (Brint et al. 2005) presumably heightens
the importance of general education as a source of employment security, supporting rather than detracting from its claims to making a cultural contribution.

Forces of Change

Over the 25-year period covered by our study, we have shown a significant growth in both global cultural awareness (world cultures and diversity) and basic academic skills (English composition, speech/communication, mathematics, and foundations) subjects in our sample institutions. The former originates in the efforts of social movement activists of the 1960s and 1970s to expand what had been until that time a curriculum dominated by men, whites, and Europeans. Without socio-demographic transformations encouraging the incorporation of these understandings, they would almost certainly not have become embedded in the general education curriculum (see, e.g. Frank, Schofer, and Torres 1994; Nussbaum 1997; Rojas 2007). The sense of the world as increasingly inter-connected has also contributed to these understandings. The growing importance of basic academic skills subjects reflects a different set of circumstances – i.e. the many poorly-prepared students who have been entering institutions of higher education and, perhaps also, the interests of their prospective employers in guaranteeing the basic skills and competencies of these students (see, e.g., AAC&U 2007; Spellings Commission 2006).

The agents of change are, most importantly, leaders of colleges and universities themselves. Administrators and faculty are sensitive to the changing socio-demographic composition and levels of preparation for college work among their student bodies. They are prepared to think about general education in more global terms, and they are
equally prepared to be concerned about the basic skills of their students. In a few cases, integrated public university systems or state higher education governing bodies have implemented requirements consistent with these concerns (Rudnitski 2007).

External advocacy organizations and regulatory agencies are secondary change agents, but they can be more broadly influential because they reach beyond individual institutions. These external agencies include, on one side, specialized higher education associations linked to the foundation world and the traditional purposes of liberal education; and, on the other, regional accrediting bodies linked to state human capital development and accountability interests.⁷

In the 1980s, reform efforts were supported by the Exxon Educational Foundation, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and other important actors in the higher education field. It appears that the efforts of these actors had real effects on the volume and level of prescription in GE. Specialized higher education associations, such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT), have also had an influence on the content of general education. Through research and advocacy, they have encouraged expansion of general education requirements and more prescription. They have also encouraged the introduction of particular content areas (notably, world cultures, diversity-related courses, and ethics). The AAC&U has been an advocate of incorporating the experiences of women and minorities since the mid-1980s (see, e.g., Hall and Sandler 1984; Moses 1989) and has advocated adding courses on gender, diversity, and nonwestern cultures
since the early 1990s (see, e.g., AAC&U 1995; Cornwell and Stoddard 1999; Musil 1992, 1995).

Regional accrediting agencies also have had an influence on general education. 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, however, vary in the extent to which general education is a concern and in their emphases about the desirable objectives of general education curricula. Standards for accreditation in the North Central Association, for example, have 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).

Concluding Observation

The seeming incoherence of general education in American colleges and universities has produced regular proposals for its reform. In the past, these proposals often focused on a revival of the traditional liberal arts fields (see, e.g., Bell 1966; NAS 1996). In recent years, they have included a wider range of alternatives, such as a proposal from the University of California to introduce theme-based “bundles” of courses to provide perspectives on key issues such as environmental sustainability and terrorism (UCCGE 2007), and another from a former dean of the University of Chicago to focus on
the Eastern-inspired metaphor of the inhaling and exhaling of breath as a paradigm for rethinking general education (Levine 2006).

In our view, such proposals have little chance of gaining wide institutional support. Slow change is far more apparent in our data than rapid transformations. Over the last 25 years, the most important actors in the system have focused on broadening the geographical and social frame of general education and ensuring that students have strong foundations in the core skills areas of English composition, speech, and mathematics. In so far as these actors continue to be influential, we can expect, in addition to the persistence of popular general education genres, and considerable variability, continued slow movement toward the global social awareness and basic academic skills subjects that became increasingly important elements of general education in the later 20th century.

Notes

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

2 Thirty-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 (less than 2 percent of the total) a course had a 0 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.
The word “genre” has literary and artistic roots, but is now often used simply to refer to a category or class of phenomena.

The 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.

In 1975, the pattern of courses loading on this factor is different, indicating that the business/technical genre did not emerge until later in the time period. For this reason, we exclude 1975 from the regression analysis reported in Table 3.

We 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=.8) with operating budget per student.

Although rare, legislated mandates have also led to change in general education requirements in some states. Thus, for example, the state of Arkansas mandates general education core curriculum divided among six areas (University of Arkansas 2006: 1). Particular subjects are also sometimes mandated. In the early 2000s, postsecondary civics education was mandated by nine states (Kedrowski 2003).
General Education Genres

References


Brint, S., M. Riddle, L. Turk-Bicakci, and C. S. Levy. 2005. From the liberal to the practical arts in American colleges and universities: Organizational analysis and
General Education Genres


General Education Genres


Chicago: University of Chicago Press.


General Education Genres

Philadelphia: Middle States Commission on Higher Education.


General Education Genres


General Education Genres