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Frankly, My Dear, No One Gives a Damn About General Education!

“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn” is a line from the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind* starring Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh. The line is spoken by Rhett Butler as his last words to Scarlett O’Hara in response to her tearful questions: “Where shall I go? What shall I do?” (Dawn, December 14, 2014) This quotation was voted the number one movie line of all time by the American Film Institute in 2005 (American Film Institute, June 21, 2005).

In the novel, *Gone with the Wind*, written by Margaret Mitchell, Scarlet O’Hara undergoes a dramatic transformation throughout the story. She begins as a spoiled Southern belle and evolves into a resilient and determined woman who faces adversity head on. The last line in the novel and the movie, “After all, tomorrow is another day.” first seems weak and inconclusive, but it encapsulates Scarlett’s indomitable spirit and her ability to persevere in the face of hardship. It reflects her determination to confront challenges of a changing world with optimism and resilience.

For those of us who champion General Education in the nation’s community colleges, there are lessons in this epic that can be addressed in two questions:

1. Does anyone give a damn about General Education?
2. Is there any hope in the future for General Education?

Does Anyone Give a Damn About General Education?

Looking for an answer to this question, I decided to search in the annual conference programs of the five major community college organizations in the nation.

Five Annual Conferences of Major Community College Organizations

The 2023 conferences of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC), the League for Innovation in the Community College (League) the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), Achieving the Dream (ATD), and the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) were selected for this study. The study focused on the entire programs distributed to those attending the conferences including the sessions offered from proposals to the sponsoring organizations. The study assumed that proposals from the field represented most of the current priorities of practitioners working in the field. ACCT holds its national conference in October, so this study included its 2022 program. (O'Banion, December 2023).

Google Word Count was used to count the selected terms that appeared in the programs of the five conferences. Google Word Count is based on 40 million books in 5 different languages in a partnership with Google and libraries around the world. The author did not attempt to report the word count for the terms reported by individual organizations. The word count for the terms selected are reported as totals of the extent to which the terms appeared in all five of the conference programs.

One of the limitations of this study is that counting specific words may not provide a full picture of the context of ideas, and some may question the value of tallying words in a document to determine any kind of meaning from such tallies. However, in an article (Baldrige, January 31, 2018, p. 2), the author noted, "Words are containers of power. Words motivate or deflate thoughts hopes, dreams, and actions. Words have the power to excite, inspire, elate, sadden, frighten, anger, or give hope. Language is behavior. What you say matters. It shapes your environment, your work and your life." As the judicial philosopher Learned Hand said, "Words are chameleons, which reflect the color of their environment." In this study, the environment is the community college to the extent its priorities are reflected in conference programs.

The most disappointing finding in this study for the author was a resounding "NO" to the question, Does anyone give a damn about General Education? The term Liberal Education (which is fairly synonymous with General Education in the community college), did not appear in any of the programs of the five organizations. The term General Education was mentioned only four times in the five programs—three times in the title of a presenter such as Dean of *General Education*, Academic, and Career Pathways and in another instance in an introductory statement to a session "College and university students across the U. S. have difficulty articulating the valuable, marketable skills gained in *general education* courses."

Every community college in the nation has some form of General Education required by all regional accrediting commissions. In our 2021-2022 national study on General Education in the community college, my colleague Cindy Miles and I found the state of General Education to be dismal. The most disturbing finding in our study was that the 30 colleges in our sample,

on average, required students to take 12 General Education courses from a haystack of 162 courses. Course options ranged from 49 to 491 in large colleges, from 68 to 372 in medium colleges, and from 58 to 223 in small colleges. (O'Banion and Miles, 2021).

In a California community college, the catalog includes four different sets of requirements for General Education degrees—already confusing for students. In the college's General Education requirements of 6 courses, students must choose from among 217 different courses (one course from 46 in natural sciences, one from 47 in social and behavioral sciences, one from 79 in art, humanities, and culture, etc.). In an Ohio community college, students must choose from 46 different courses in the arts and humanities to meet a three-course General Education requirement, from 36 courses in the social sciences, and from 48 in math and science. In a Texas community college, students are required to select five courses from among 78 courses in 3 different categories to meet General Education requirements. (O'Banion, 2022, p. 26). Dismal is the right word for the state of General Education in the contemporary community college.

Is There Any Hope in the Future for General Education?

In Scarlett O'Hara's plaintive, but hopeful summary of her life, "After all, tomorrow is another day." we are encouraged to ask whether there is a tomorrow for General Education in the community college.

"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time; and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

In Macbeth's soliloquy Shakespeare suggests that every tomorrow is like all other tomorrows. Professor Hester of the University of Cambridge provides this interpretation:

"The *petty pace* can be a place, a pass, a small, insignificant place—the world—or it can be a way of walking, *creeping*, just getting by, not stalking with magnificence, bestriding the world like a colossus but rather simply existing, ordinary, unremarkable. One foot in front of the other, one day after another, on and on, until the end, the last word, the last sound. Time stretches out, undifferentiated, a directionless, meaningless trudge. Why should *tomorrow* be any different? Why should *tomorrow*—or anything—mean anything at all? (Hester, (April 10, 2022))"

If Shakespeare is right that "tomorrow" signifies nothing, then there may be no tomorrow for General Education.

However, there is some hope. The Teagle Foundation was established in 1944 by Walter C. Teagle (1878-1962), longtime president and later chairman of the board of Standard Oil Company (New Jersey), now Exxon Mobil Corporation. Mr. Teagle gave the Foundation a broad mandate, “to advance the well-being and general good of mankind throughout the world.” (Teagle Foundation History (Para. 1))

The Foundation placed priority on several special projects over the decades and during a one-year moratorium in 2003-2004 to determine its future decided to place a priority on liberal education, which is its primary mission today. Their mission statement reads: “The Teagle Foundation works to support and strengthen liberal arts education, which we see as fundamental to meaningful work, effective citizenship, and a fulfilling life. Our aim is to serve as a catalyst for the improvement of teaching and learning in the arts and sciences while addressing issues of financial sustainability and accountability in higher education.” (Teagle Foundation Mission (Para. 1))

A key initiative at Teagle is the Cornerstone: Learning for Living program based on a successful program at Purdue University designed to reinvigorate the humanities in general education. Colleges selected for funding receive a \$25,000 planning grant to describe the program they plan to implement; colleges selected to develop their programs qualify for a grant up to \$300,000.

Using “transformative texts” is a major focus of the Cornerstone program and other programs at Teagle. This approach is based, in part, on the idea of the Great Books as the basis for a curriculum in the liberal arts although the Teagle Foundation and the institutions receiving grants are expanding the Great Books idea to include more contemporary texts and texts from traditions outside of the west.

Robert Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, and his friend, philosopher Mortimer Adler, created the *Great Books of the Western World*. In 1952, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. published the 54 volumes in the collection.

Three community colleges that have received grants from Teagle serve as examples of how these institutions are using transformative texts to improve and expand the teaching of the liberal arts on their campuses.

Austin Community College (ACC), Texas

At ACC, all guided pathways begin with a student success course required of all incoming students. Under the direction of Ted Hadzi-Antich, Jr., ACC’s Associate Professor of Political Science, a “Great Questions Seminar” has been created to meet the student success course requirement and to provide incoming students with a common intellectual experience anchored in transformative texts. Students then have the option to complete the “Great Questions Journey” to satisfy distribution requirements in the transferrable General

Education core. All “Great Questions” courses use transformative texts to stimulate discussion and encourage students to make cross-disciplinary connections as they move through General Education requirements.

The Great Questions Seminar (GQS) is a 16-week seminar taught by faculty from a variety of disciplines guiding incoming students as they engage with a set of common texts—including works such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, Euclid’s *Elements*, and poetry from around the world—while learning the practical skills needed to be successful in college and familiarizing themselves with the resources available on campus, from the library to the counseling center. The texts for the seminar are chosen by faculty to prompt students to examine their own ideas in conversation with peers and to strengthen enduring habits of critical analysis and thinking they will continue to use in subsequent coursework and in the world of work.

The GQS is designed for students at all levels of academic preparation. Conspicuously lacking from sections are lectures, PowerPoint presentations, and textbooks. Students learn along with faculty guides, who are typically not subject matter experts on the assigned texts and who model how to approach works that might initially seem daunting with openness, curiosity, and as an “engaged amateur.” All sections of GQS are taught from a standardized syllabus, providing all students with a common intellectual experience rooted in seminal works in the arts and sciences that serve as a foundation upon which they can build their diverse majors.

ACC has been engaging in an ambitious and collegewide faculty recruitment and training effort, increasing the number of sections each year to fit demand. Instructors are permitted to teach GQS only after completing the training needed to maintain the integrity of the course and to ensure they are prepared to teach students at all levels of academic preparation. As a resource for faculty and students alike, the syllabus includes a comprehensive list of study questions that faculty can use to help guide class discussions, regardless of their familiarity with the texts. During the pandemic, ACC pivoted to conduct additional faculty training seminars (conducted virtually) and to develop an online teaching and curriculum development institute.

As of 2023, 125 ACC faculty members from over 20 different departments, spanning government to nursing, have been recruited and trained to teach GQS. Since 2018, over 3,000 students have completed GQS, with the goal of offering enough sections to enroll an estimated 1,500 incoming students each year.

Linn-Benton Community College (LBCC), Oregon

LBCC’s Cornerstone Project, led by Mark Urista, Communications Faculty and Dionisia Morales, English Faculty, is a series of humanities courses that engage students of all majors in reading and discussing transformative texts. The classes revolve around a discussion model and offer core-text readings in lieu of textbooks. Students develop and practice skills

needed to speak clearly, read carefully, reason effectively, and think creatively—giving them a solid foundation to build their academic careers and professional goals and become engaged lifelong civic leaders.

During the Planning Grant phase, LBCC set the foundation for its transformative-text initiative in the General Education requirements and career pathways. LBCC's Cornerstone Project redesigned existing, required coursework in Writing 121 (Composition), Communication 111 (Public Speaking), Communication 114 (Argument and Critical Discourse), and Humanities 103 (Romantic Era to Contemporary Society). In the Implementation phase, LBCC expanded its Cornerstone course offerings to also include Art 102 (Understanding Art), Music 161 (Music Appreciation), Humanities 101 (Prehistory to Middle Ages), and Humanities 102 (Renaissance to Enlightenment). Moving forward, it will include additional humanities electives like anthropology and religion and is seeking ways to involve STEM classes.

In addition to integrating transformative texts into academic classes, transformative texts are also included in the college's First-Year Seminar for all incoming AA degree seekers. First-Year Seminar is designed to support students in their first term by providing strategies, knowledge, resources, and connections to ensure student success. Since its Cornerstone implementation, First-Year Seminar now also includes transformative texts.

The LBCC's Cornerstone Project has the potential to re-engage the college with the core question about the necessary role of liberal arts in students' education experience at the community college level, for students in transfer degrees, as well as for students seeking two-year degrees. LBCC has a number of existing centers and agencies engaged with the project and a statewide-recognized research unit participating in the assessment of project outcomes. The assessments include analyses of student progress and satisfaction, faculty perspectives, impact on college policies and structures, and impact on college culture. Since almost 12 percent of LBCC students are Hispanic/Latino, the Cornerstone team works closely with its Office of Institutional Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion to ensure that the transformative texts used in the program reflect perspectives of historically marginalized or oppressed groups.

Students who successfully complete three Cornerstone classes earn LBCC's Liberal Arts Focus Award. Survey data show that student retention is five percent higher for Cornerstone students compared to non-Cornerstone students. 86 percent of students surveyed say their Cornerstone class increased their confidence with engaging challenging texts. 70 percent of students surveyed say they have discussed their transformative text with friends and/or family.

Across the college, the Cornerstone project has sparked conversations about improving the quality of LBCC students' learning experiences in humanities courses and the First-Year Seminar. In addition, attention has turned to the ways in which discussion-based classes

enhance students' critical thinking, communication, and collaborative problem-solving—essential skills needed to succeed in college and careers.

Hostos Community College/CUNY (HCC), New York

Hostos Community College is the lead institution on a multi-campus Pathways to the Liberal Arts project, Core Books@CUNY, that supports the incorporation of core texts into established, required, liberal arts courses. Led by Andrea Fabrizio, Associate Dean, Office of Academic Affairs, and Gregory Marks, English Professor, the project is a collaboration with Columbia University. Working closely with Roosevelt Montás, former Director of the Core Curriculum at Columbia, Core Books@CUNY has identified a set of core texts from Columbia's Literature Humanities and Contemporary Civilization syllabi that align with the learning outcomes of the general education courses at HCC. In 2020, Hostos Community College, Borough of Manhattan Community College, LaGuardia Community College, and New York City College of Technology launched professional development initiatives for faculty to explore effective strategies and pedagogy for incorporating core books into these courses. The goal of the project is to engage students with humanistic questions within these core texts. In co-requisite English and composition courses, students are honing their reading and writing skills through readings such as *Antigone*, Dante's *Inferno*, Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk*, and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. In reading these texts, students grapple with timeless questions such as, what is the purpose of an education? What is love? What does it mean to be human? and What is justice? These topics and questions become the subjects of class discussion, as well as the material for informal and formal reading and writing activities.

The project has developed an extensive repository of teaching materials for these texts (see <https://corebooks.commons.gc.cuny.edu/>) ranging from introductory class discussion questions to group projects, reading guides, and essay assignments. The goal is to make these core texts accessible and relevant to students and to engage them in conversations from which they are often excluded. Students are invited to interpret, question, and perhaps even reject the ideas and concepts the texts raise while also meeting all the learning outcomes of the general education course into which they have been incorporated.

The Core Books@CUNY initiative also seeks to create a community of practice for faculty so they can continue to share curriculum and teaching materials in an ever-evolving approach to introducing students to these core texts.

Since the start of the project in 2020, about 3,400 students have taken a section of English, First-Year Seminar, or behavioral and social sciences that is part of the Core Books@ CUNY Project.

Conclusion

These three community colleges funded by the Teagle Foundation are on the right track regarding the renewal of the humanities and the liberal arts. The use of transformative texts from historical and contemporary great books and is an innovation in the community college that is a fresh approach for the faculty and the students.

However, it remains to be seen if these innovations will lead to a major reform of the existing General Education programs deeply embedded in the culture of these colleges. The “distributed curriculum,” less kindly referred to as the “cafeteria curriculum,” has been the standard for decades and institutional policies, practices, and structures have been constructed around this curriculum that will keep it in place for years to come.

These three community colleges, as do all community colleges, continue to feature in their catalogs the traditional “cafeteria curriculum” as their General Education program or Associate of Arts degree. In their 2023-24 college catalogs, Austin Community College lists 288 courses from which students must select 14 to meet requirements; Linn-Benton Community College students must select 17 courses from 241. At Hostos Community College, students must choose 10 courses from Hostos CC Pathways Common Core Approved list of 102 courses. There is almost nothing in the catalogs about the Teagle-funded Projects.

President Woodrow Wilson once said, “It is easier to move a cemetery than to change the curriculum.” And some wag added, “You get no help from the residents.” In these three colleges and an increasing number of others seeking change in the General Education curriculum, only a handful of the residents are willing to do the hard work of change; the great majority of the current residents are apparently comfortable with the status quo and just may not give a damn.

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