General education, or GE, programs offer the first taste of college to millions of students each year and constitute at least half of most associate degrees that community colleges offer. General education has been a valued priority in community colleges since the 1950s, and we, the authors of this article, have been its advocates for decades. But a lot has happened over those decades, including the massive reform movements to increase equitable student success that have swept the nation’s two-year institutions in recent years. Thus, in fall 2020, we began a national study of GE programs in community colleges to gain an understanding of the current status of such programs, the results of which will be published early this year.

Our approach for this study was to review GE philosophy statements, requirements and approved course offerings from the most recent catalogs of a random, stratified sample of 30 community colleges. We drew that sample from the most recent Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education listing of American public two-year colleges that granted associate degrees, excluding specialized institutions. We examined three subgroups of two-year colleges as categorized by the Carnegie Classification: large/very large (a full-time-equivalent enrollment of 5,000 or greater), medium (2,000 to 4,999) and small/very small (1,999 or fewer). We also examined the expectations of the seven regional accrediting commissions about general education programs to explore whether college GE philosophy statements and offerings reflected those expectations.

What We Discovered

We saw some interesting patterns that we’d like to share with community college leaders as they consider their curricula going forward—and the place general education should hold in it. Here are 10 key findings from our study.
1. Required GE programs are universal to community colleges across the U.S. Every community college and statewide community college system we examined required a general education program.

2. Almost two-thirds of community colleges include a philosophy statement on general education in their catalogs. Colleges described their programs in lofty terms about preparing students for whatever the world, their lives or the future might bring, as in these examples:

- The general education program provides a foundation in the knowledge and skills needed to develop a life of personal fulfillment and contribution to society.
- The purpose of the general education core is to ensure that college students have the broad knowledge and skills to become lifelong learners in a global community that will continue to change.
- General education seeks to assist students in obtaining the knowledge, skills and attitudes that enhance quality of life and the ability to function effectively in an ever-changing society.

3. Most colleges make it clear that their intention for general education is to offer a common core of knowledge and skills that all students need. We saw this theme echoed in recurrent language across institutions, captured in phrases like “a common body of knowledge,” “skills that are deemed to be commonly shared” and “common to all students regardless of major.”

4. Colleges often make clear the connection between their general education programs and accreditation requirements. The course descriptions frequently included references to accreditation obligations, and we confirmed all seven regional accrediting commissions have requirements addressing the general education programs of their member institutions. The expectations from accreditors are similar in spirit and largely nonprescriptive, but all compel general education programs to demonstrate broad and substantive learning—typically framed as “breadth” and “depth”—based on a cohesive or coherent curricular framework.

5. The ideals that colleges described for their general education programs rarely translate to cohesive, integrated bodies of knowledge. The lofty language isn’t reflected in what colleges actually offer their students. After their high-minded and admirable philosophy descriptions, most colleges provide lengthy lists of disparate courses from which students are to choose, or they refer students to catalog lists of all the courses in particular disciplines. Here are two common instructions:

- Choose one course from List A. Choose two courses from Lists B and C.
Select any two courses from the following disciplines: anthropology, economics, geography, history, political science, psychology, social science, sociology.

6. Community colleges, on average, require students to select a dozen courses from a mixed bag of 162 approved courses to meet general education requirement. Most colleges call for students to take 10 to 13 general courses and have them choose those from an average of 181 courses in large colleges, 203 courses in medium colleges and 102 courses in small colleges. Bear in mind, these are specifically approved courses—not electives—that colleges require students to sort through to select a handful to attain an associate degree and, ultimately, the purported ideal of being educated members of society.

7. The range of course options that colleges have approved to meet required general education courses is overwhelmingly expansive. Courses included Women's Self Defense, History of Rock and Roll, Elementary American Sign Language and Liberal Arts Math, all in one college. We found general education offerings from 49 to 491 courses in large colleges, from 68 to 372 in medium colleges and from 58 to 223 in small colleges. Colleges in states with strong centralized governance systems, including a mandatory general education core and state approval of general education courses, offered far fewer options than those in states with more local control.

8. Most colleges categorize their general education requirements into five major subject areas. Those areas are commonly named arts and humanities, social and behavioral sciences, natural sciences, communication and composition, and mathematics. We found consistency in the number of required courses within each area, but great variety in options offered. Most colleges had a three-course requirement in arts and humanities but offered 10 times that many course options. In social and behavioral sciences, six medium colleges, two large colleges and one small college approved at least 50 courses to meet a two-course requirement. We found more uniformity among natural sciences options for colleges’ one or two required courses, with large, medium and small colleges averaging 31, 33 and 21 course choices, respectively. Still, students at a medium-size college in the study had to sort through 91 natural science courses to pick two.

9. Two general education areas have significantly consistent requirements and constrained options. Those are: 1) communication and composition and 2) mathematics. More than half the colleges in our study offered no choice among their required English composition/rhetoric or speech courses. All 30 colleges required a
single college-level mathematics course to be selected from one or two options available to most students. We were left to wonder that if faculty in communication and composition and in mathematics could come together to limit GE course options to those deemed essential, why couldn’t faculty in other GE areas do the same?

10. Colleges approve at least four times more general education courses than they require, and most have students choose from pools of courses at least 10 times larger than they require. Despite abundant claims about promoting a common core, our findings point to the reality that the nation’s current community college general education programs continue to cultivate the cafeteria curriculum—a wild smorgasbord of courses from which students must select a dozen courses to be labeled “college educated.”

Key Takeaways

No matter the size of the college, the big takeaway from this study is clear: the great glut of required general education courses and dizzyingly long lists of course offerings from which students must choose to meet those requirements puts unhealthy pressure on students and inhibits colleges from living up to their ideals. A growing body of literature suggests too many choices creates a great deal of stress for students at a time when they are under pressure to make some of the most significant decisions in their lives.

What’s more, the negative impacts of the tangled surfeit of general education courses fall most heavily on the most vulnerable students, those whom the reform efforts underway in community colleges are striving to support. Providing enough academic advisers to help every student make individual decisions seems out of reach, and technology can’t solve this problem for marginalized or digitally disenfranchised students.

President Woodrow Wilson said, “It is easier to move a cemetery than to change the curriculum.” And a wag added, “In either case, you get no help from the residents.” To date, curricular reform in general education has amounted to little more than trimming the branches of a dead tree and haphazardly tossing about handfuls of seeds to see what takes root. Across the nation, inspiring work is underway in community colleges to build intentional pathways to guide student learning and success, eradicate long-standing equity barriers like mandatory placement exams, and streamline academic pipelines from high school through university transfer to the workplace. But we’ve seen little motivation at most two-year colleges to tackle the general education jungle. For
colleges that are serious about general education reform, these first few steps could begin the journey:

- Examine enrollments in all current courses that meet general education requirements and delete those that post zero enrollments or fewer than five students in any one term.
- Establish criteria related to general education outcomes for all new courses submitted to the basic list.
- Appoint a faculty task force committed to quality education to review current philosophy and programs of general education and to recommend a general education program for the 21st century.

If faculty and administrative leaders do not take responsibility and find a way to prioritize this effort, the community college our students deserve today and the community college our communities need for the future may never come to full fruition.

Section: Community Colleges
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