

A renewed focus on the liberal arts

White Paper

FRAMING STATEMENT

General education at Georgia College (GC) is broader than the core curriculum; it is the curriculum that is shared by all students and forms the basis for developing essential intellectual, civic, and practical capacities in students. GC has many pieces important to a general education program (first-year experience, core curriculum, capstones, etc.) but lacks the intentionality that knits these elements together into a cohesive experience. In the last several years, GC has drifted away from its core mission as a liberal arts institution, reflected in the lack of a distinctive general education program grounded in the liberal arts. Renewing the institutional focus on the liberal arts will guide us in the exercise of negotiating the space between what is possible as a liberal arts institution and what is required by external forces (USG, SACSCOC, etc).

PROBLEM STATEMENT & RATIONALE

"It [General Education] sounds viable to professors who spend their lives examining various approaches, but let's be honest about how it appears to 19-year-olds. They see such an "array" as merely a bunch of random, disconnected courses outside their major. The courses they finish don't cohere into a 'core' or a 'common experience.' They're just a bunch of heterogeneous hoops to pass through. When students can fulfill their humanities requirement by choosing from a list of 47 courses . . . we should drop the language of 'core' altogether."

~excerpted from "[The State of General Education](#)" by Mark Bauerlein

Since Georgia College became Georgia's Public Liberal Arts University in 1996, the institution has focused on delivering a high quality, engaging and transformative educational experience that prepares students to be globally-engaged citizens. During this same time, several important national initiatives emerged to understand and articulate the value of a liberal arts education in a growingly diverse, information-intensive society. The most notable of these efforts is AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, which developed the Essential Learning Outcomes, Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics and more recently the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP). An important product of AAC&U's effort to understand what makes a liberal arts education transformative for students comes from Kuh's work on high-impact educational practices. GC has embraced this work by developing a first-year experience, piloting learning communities, developing writing-intensive courses in the major and the core, establishing a dynamic undergraduate research and creative endeavors (URACE) program across majors, developing internationalization plans in the majors including a global perspectives overlay, adopting a diversity action plan (DAP) with a strong curriculum focus and a domestic diversity overlay pilot, adopting a quality enhancement plan (QEP), ENGAGE with an emphasis on community-based engaged learning (C-bEL) and implementing internships and capstones in the majors. The sum of these initiatives aligns with **every** high-impact practice identified in Kuh's work.

Georgia College's challenge is that despite the fact that we know these initiatives have demonstrated impressive outcomes and meaningful experiences for individual students, we do not have direct evidence on the impact of these practices institutionally. We currently don't know how many students are engaged in high-impact practices, nor do we have university-wide evidence of the resulting personal and professional growth (or just the outcomes). The following responses of seniors from the 2014 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provide some insight from the student perspective.

Participation in high-impact practices

- Only 3% reported that they have not (or will not) participated in a high-impact practice.
- 93% reported that they have or plan to participate in a culminating senior experience (capstone course, senior project or thesis, comprehensive exam, portfolio, etc.).

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- 78% reported that they have or plan to complete an internship (field experience, student teaching, clinical placement, etc.).
 - 77% reported that they have had one or more courses that included a community-based project.
 - 62% reported that they have or plan to adopt a formal leadership role in a student organization.
 - 44% reported that they have or plan to work with a faculty member on a research project.
 - 32% reported that they have or plan to participate in a study abroad program.

Reflective and Integrative Learning

- 19% indicated they never or only sometimes connected ideas from their courses to their prior experiences and knowledge.
- 35% indicated they never or only sometimes combined ideas from different courses.
- 35% indicated they never or only sometimes tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective.
- 35% indicated they never or only sometimes learned something that changed the way they understand an issue or concept.
- 37% indicated they never or only sometimes examined the strengths and weaknesses of their own views on a topic or issue.
- 38% indicated they never or only sometimes connected their learning to societal problems or issues.
- 47% of students indicated that they never or only sometimes included diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in course discussions or assignments.

These statistics show that students have high participation in high-impact, experiential practices but students have difficulty making connections across their learning experiences. We need to establish a mechanism for students to integrate the variety of curricular and co-curricular activities in which they participate into a cohesive whole. The NSSE data highlights the fact that few students currently have the opportunity to reflect on the sum of their experiences.

The GC mission to “develop the intellectual, professional, and civic skills and dispositions that enable graduates to thrive in an information-intensive and diverse global society” requires students to integrate their learning across discrete experiences (core classes, major classes, capstones, and co-curricular activities). Further support comes from a survey of employers conducted by Hart Research Associates in 2015. Nearly all those surveyed (91%) say that “a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a candidate’s] undergraduate major” and 96% agree that “all college students should have experiences that teach them how to solve problems with people whose views are different from their own.”

Faculty perceptions of the curriculum play an important role in how students engage with their general education experience. In a survey administered in Fall 2014, when GC faculty were asked “In your opinion, is our Core curriculum a distinctive liberal arts curriculum?” only 26% answered yes. The survey also asked respondents to indicate what factors influence the core curriculum, responses pointed to Area B as place where distinction occurs and cited USG constraints as reasons for a lack of distinctiveness in the curriculum. Clearly, the faculty believe that there is a need to improve the distinctiveness of the core curriculum at GC.

BUILDING A FRAMEWORK FOR GENERAL EDUCATION

This analysis brings forward a question worth answering about the educational experience at GC: How do we ensure that students integrate learning across their major coursework and their experience in high-impact practices? We propose that providing a framework for students to understand how their academic and experiential work are intentional parts of their liberal arts education along with opportunities to discuss with faculty and advisors the ideas behind and value of a liberal education is an important first step.

An inventory of high-impact practices on campus demonstrates that currently, there are strong programs in undergraduate research and creative endeavors, community-based learning and scholarship, leadership and diversity/global learning anchored by majors with well-crafted curricula. Figure 1 provides a potential conceptual framework to help students understand how these pieces fit together in a holistic liberal arts experience for students. This framework provides a starting point for the GC community explore how a general education plan can bring these five elements, all flagship programs at GC, into a cohesive experience that guides students in critical reflection of their learning.



Figure 1. Example conceptual framework integrating the many parts of a Georgia College liberal arts experience.

One of the key assets of a liberal arts education is that it cultivates critical thinking and interdisciplinary work, allowing students (and faculty) to approach complex problems or issues from multiple perspectives. While some students get exposure to interdisciplinary approaches within our current core curriculum (for instance, in the GC1Y and 2Y courses) or their major coursework, the structure of this interdisciplinary work is often fragmented and unconnected to the student’s broader educational goals. Thematic “threads” or pathways provide a structural and connective solution to these shortcomings. For example, a “Sustainability and Society” thread might include a new sociology course, an environmental science course, an economics course, and a geography course, while allowing the student to make strategic progress toward the completion of degree requirements. These could work with the existing or a slightly modified USG core curriculum. The thread would ideally lead to a capstone project or other signature

work. Connecting coursework along such pathways or threads builds upon Georgia College’s innovations in Area B (the GC1Y and 2Y courses), which many faculty feel is now the strongest part of our core curriculum (“State of the Core Report”).

ACTION PLAN, FALL 2015

PROPOSAL: HOLD “RENEWING OUR FOCUS ON THE LIBERAL ARTS” KICK-OFF EVENT ON AUGUST 10TH

In order to introduce the university community to the short-term plans and involve them in the creation of a plan for general education at GC, the IGEA Team would like to propose a kick-off event the morning of August 10. The event will serve as an opportunity for people to commit themselves to renewing our focus on the liberal arts mission. This 1-2 hour interactive event will also be an ideal time to solicit volunteers to serve on the work groups and encourage individuals to sign up for discussion groups.

PROPOSAL: COMMUNICATE THE VALUE OF THE LIBERAL ARTS TO STUDENTS

Our students do not understand the value of a liberal arts education and are often unaware that the skills developed through the liberal arts are highly valued in the workplace (Hart, 2015). Many professional staff and student advisors (admissions counselors, academic advisors, career advisors, orientation leaders, community advisors, student ambassadors, etc) provide crucial touch points for students, as they enter college and proceed to graduation. We propose to develop ongoing workshops and seminars for these professionals so they are best prepared to communicate the value of the liberal arts to their students. To jump-start this initiative, the 2015 incoming class of students will also be given copies of “What Is a Liberal Education? And Why Is It Important to My Future?”, a brochure published by AAC&U to communication the value of the liberal arts to students. This brochure will help advisors frame a conversation with students about the value of a liberal arts education.

RESOURCE: AAC&U Brochure What Is a Liberal Education? And Why Is It Important to My Future?

<https://secure.aacu.org/store/detail.aspx?id=LEAPST>

PROPOSAL: A RENEWED FOCUS ON THE LIBERAL ARTS DISCUSSION SERIES

As mission drift is a problem that affects everyone, we want to engage the university community in the process of contributing to the solution. By bringing this up through a discussion series, we can model the process of integrating diverse viewpoints into a robust liberal arts experience in which stakeholders are invested. Faculty & staff will be able to participate in the discussion in a facilitated small group setting with shared readings and a common framework over the course of the 2015-2016 academic year. The topics for discussion include:

- Making the Case for the Value of the Liberal Arts
- Understanding the Liberal Arts at Georgia College: Institutional Context
- Understanding the Liberal Arts at Georgia College: Core Curriculum
- Characteristics of a GC Graduate

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- The first-year experience & Capstones
 - Experiential learning & High-impact Practices
 - Integrating academic and co-curricular experiences
Ideas to contemplate:
 - *Nebraska Wesleyan University's "archway curriculum"
<https://catalog.nebrwesleyan.edu/cc/2014-2015/general-education-archway-curriculum>
 - *University of Central Oklahoma's Student Transformative Learning Record
<http://www.uco.edu/central/tl/stlr/index.asp>
 - Signature work and e-portfolios
 - Assessing critical thinking
 - Developing OUR vision for a liberal arts education at Georgia College

APPENDED RESOURCES

- (1) Draft State of the Core Report prepared by the Subcommittee on Core Curriculum, Spring 2015
https://www.dropbox.com/s/91rrqo4fpug287/State%20of%20Core%20Report_DRAFT.pdf?dl=0
- (2) Report of the 2014 NSSE data on high-impact practices
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/5ed4ma50pnj7ydl/14NSSE-HIPs.pdf?dl=0>

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