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## General Education Is Career Education

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Education critics often lament the decline of general education or chastise its irrelevance to our students' futures (Delbanco & Peede, 2020; Mintz, 2020). While liberal arts traditionalists resent that students just want to get their gen-ed courses "out of the way," many students resent the amount of time general education takes away from major classes and career exploration—the "real" reasons they came to college in the first place (Fain, 2020). In the face of the pandemic, calls for racial justice, and political turmoil, Debra Humphreys reminds us that "the most valuable education over the long term is the one that provides the most marketable combination of specific and general skills." Today's undergraduate students need both a broad general education and a strong preparation for career success. Those two objectives occur simultaneously throughout a general education program. We need to do a better job of helping our students understand that fact.

There are three strategies that would help large universities solidify the connections between general education and career preparation: (1) administratively reorganizing the units that offer general education courses to foreground the career readiness skills inherent in general education courses; (2) implementing an academic minor or other credential in career readiness that emphasizes the transferable skills embedded in the courses students complete throughout their undergraduate career; and (3) mounting a public awareness campaign to "brand" general education programs and explain their function to students, faculty, and parents.

### The disciplinary emphasis

Traditionally, general education programs are defined by disciplinary content. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Committee on Colleges (SACSCOC, 2018), for example, mandates that each of its accredited institutions have a general education program that includes "at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/fine arts, social/behavioral sciences, and natural science/mathematics" to ensure that the program provides "breadth of knowledge" (p. 81). Because accreditors such as SACSCOC continue to use disciplinary-based language, academic content areas and their narrowly defined learning objectives are what universities emphasize and what students remember even when general education programs veer away from such language. (In other words, students speak of taking their English or sociology course instead of their communication fluency or cultural diversity course.)

Faculty also tend to emphasize the disciplinary goals of the courses they teach rather than the general education learning outcomes embedded within them. If they teach biology, for instance, their primary focus is to help students become biologists, not skilled critical thinkers and problem solvers. The immediate result of this combination of factors is that there are typically few signals <sup>[1]</sup> to indicate to students the skills they are learning in their required general education courses.

In addition to the role that disciplinary language plays in obscuring the links between general education and career preparation, the role of pedagogy in developing career readiness skills is also frequently undervalued. While disciplinary content tends to define academic courses, the instructional strategies used in class have a significant bearing on the skills a student learns. Every class that engages in active learning, assigns group projects, or requires that assignments be submitted on time is helping students develop career readiness skills.

## Skills-based learning outcomes

Although the specific terms universities use to describe their general education learning outcomes vary, general education learning outcomes frequently include those that appear in the American Association of Colleges & Universities' (AAC&U's) Essential Learning Outcomes <sup>[2]</sup> and VALUE rubrics <sup>[3]</sup>. These outcomes (listed in the table below) represent skills and dispositions that students should be gaining over the course of their undergraduate studies. Virginia Commonwealth University's general education learning competencies are included in the table to demonstrate the frequent similarity between AAC&U's outcomes and university-specific general education learning goals.

<b>AAC&amp;U Essential Learning Outcomes</b>	<b>NACE Career Readiness Competencies</b>	<b>VCU General Education Learning Outcomes</b>
<a href="https://www.aacu.org/essential-learning-outcomes">https://www.aacu.org/essential-learning-outcomes</a> <sup>[2]</sup>	<a href="https://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined">https://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined</a> <sup>[4]</sup>	<a href="https://provost.vcu.edu/initiatives/gened/goals/">https://provost.vcu.edu/initiatives/gened/goals/</a> <sup>[5]</sup>
Inquiry and analysis Critical thinking Creative thinking Problem solving Quantitative literacy	Critical Thinking/Problem Solving <i>Exercise sound reasoning to analyze issues, make decisions, and overcome problems. The individual is able to obtain, interpret, and use knowledge, facts, and data in this process, and may demonstrate originality and inventiveness.</i>	Problem Solving (Critical & Creative) Quantitative Literacy

Written communication  
 Oral communication  
 Reading

Oral/Written Communications      Communication Fluency  
*Articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in written and oral forms to persons inside and outside of the organization. The individual has public speaking skills; is able to express ideas to others; and can write/edit memos, letters, and complex technical reports clearly and effectively.*

Civic engagement—local and global  
 Intercultural knowledge and competence  
 Global learning

Global/Intercultural Fluency  
*Value, respect, and learn from diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and religions. The individual demonstrates openness, inclusiveness, sensitivity, and the ability to interact respectfully with all people and understand individuals' differences.*

Global and Cultural Responsiveness

Teamwork  
 Ethical reasoning

Teamwork/Collaboration      Ethical Reasoning  
*Build collaborative relationships with colleagues and customers representing diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, religions, lifestyles, and viewpoints. The individual is able to work within a team structure, and can negotiate and manage conflict.*

Professionalism/Work Ethic  
*Demonstrate personal accountability*

*and effective work habits, e.g., punctuality, working productively with others, and time workload management, and understand the impact of non-verbal communication on professional work image. The individual demonstrates integrity and ethical behavior, acts responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind, and is able to learn from his/her mistakes.*

#### Leadership

*Leverage the strengths of others to achieve common goals, and use interpersonal skills to coach and develop others. The individual is able to assess and manage his/her emotions and those of others; use empathetic skills to guide and motivate; and organize, prioritize, and delegate work.*

Digital Technology (Partial Alignment)

***Leverage existing digital technologies ethically and efficiently to solve problems, complete tasks, and accomplish goals. The individual demonstrates effective adaptability to new and emerging technologies.***

Information literacy (partial alignment)  
(emphasis added in Digital Technology definition to show overlap)

Information Literacy

Integrative learning Foundations and skills for Career Management

lifelong learning

*Identify and articulate one's skills, strengths, knowledge, and experiences relevant to the position desired and career goals, and identify areas necessary for professional growth. The individual is able to navigate and explore job options, understands and can take the steps necessary to pursue opportunities, and understands how to self-advocate for opportunities in the workplace.*

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) uses different language to describe the eight skills <sup>[6]</sup> (see table) that employers across industries value in new college graduates, but despite the linguistic differences, these two sets of learning outcomes roughly align. Both emphasize critical thinking, analysis, oral and written communication, intercultural fluency, teamwork, self-regulation, and collaborative ability. The AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes are more granularly specific, but the correspondences are clear. The skills that NACE identifies as professionalism, leadership, teamwork/collaboration, and career management frequently hide behind the content descriptions of general education (and other) courses. NACE's professionalism overlaps with the ethical/moral reasoning outcome that some universities adopt. Similarly NACE's global/intercultural fluency is echoed by the AAC&U's global learning and intercultural competence outcomes.

## **The General Education College: A counterbalance to disciplinary content**

A university may be able to make more explicit the similarity between general education and career readiness outcomes and to counteract overemphasis on a disciplinary focus by locating all or most of its required general education courses in a single unit focused solely on general education teaching. Faculty employed within this General Education College would be committed to the values of general education, and they would receive professional development opportunities intended to strengthen their ability to promote those values to their students. Ideally, these faculty would have a path to tenure based on their pedagogical contributions to the university.

Elements of this approach are found in a number of institutions. Temple University, for example, houses a director of general education within its Division of Undergraduate Studies to coordinate all general education instruction at the university <sup>[7]</sup>. The

[university studies program](#) <sup>[8]</sup> at Portland State University provides a more structured coordination of general education and is vertically embedded within all four years of the undergraduate experience. The courses in the program are taught by a combination of a small number of dedicated university studies faculty and faculty from throughout PSU's campus. Virginia Commonwealth University's [Focused Inquiry Department](#) <sup>[9]</sup> within its University College employs a full-time faculty of nearly seventy individuals to teach undergraduates three required general education critical thinking and communication courses, about one-third of the total general education requirement.

## Academic minor in career readiness skills

Another strategy is to create a program that would make an explicit connection between general academic coursework and the NACE career competencies. Such a program would build upon the relationship between the student learning outcomes of the general education program, which are expected by regional accreditors, and career preparation skills.

Virginia Commonwealth University is preparing to begin offering an [interdisciplinary career-readiness skills \(ICS\) minor](#) <sup>[10]</sup> that will help students identify the connections between general education and career preparation. The ICS minor will require students to complete courses from across campus that address the individual NACE competencies. Many of the approved courses will have also been approved for general education credit (although a student may not use them to fulfill both roles). The program will require students to reflect on how their coursework and other academic experiences—such as internships, undergraduate teaching assistantships, and semesters studying abroad—have developed their career readiness skills, and the final course in the program will require students to develop a reflective e-portfolio that documents their competency in these skills.

Related to this kind of program are programs focused on the structured use of cocurricular activities, such as what Adam Peck (2018) has proposed, or shorter and less academically focused certificate programs, such as those offered at [Fresno State University](#) <sup>[11]</sup> or [Auburn University](#) <sup>[12]</sup>. Each of these programs, however, is offered through the university's career center and at greater remove from the academic curricula.

## Advertising and awareness campaign

Finally, although advertising a general education program is something faculty members are likely to sneer at, a good name can set the tone and the expectations for the program with students, faculty, parents, and academic advisors (who play an important role in how students view their educational options; see Carlson, 2020). Boston University's [BU Hub](#) <sup>[13]</sup>, for instance, provides the campus community with both an easy way to refer to the program and a consistent reminder (reinforced by a simple graphic—see Figure 1) of the centrality of the general education program. Virginia Tech calls its general education program [Pathways](#) <sup>[14]</sup>, emphasizing the role general education plays in helping students toward their academic destination.

Figure 1. BU Hub logo

## Why not try all three strategies?

The best approach to articulating the connections between general education and career readiness may be to advocate for aspects of all three of these strategies. The importance of general education is especially obvious in our current moment, which demands a populace equipped to apply critical thinking and problem-solving skills to a rapidly changing professional world and a deeply divided civic society. A broad general education prompts intellectual humility in the face of complex problems and wicked challenges. It also gives students the skills and habits of mind that they need to become individuals who are able to thrive and advance in our complex and troubled world.

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[1] few signals:

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