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American higher education has a long history of turning crisis into opportunity. Now is the moment to do so again. The disruptions of the pandemic for colleges and students will be felt for a long time to come. But another educational crisis was already underway before the virus struck, and it, too, requires an urgent response.

Too many students leave college with a blinkered view of the world -- trained in this or that specialty but unprepared to reflect on the meaning and purpose of their own lives, and to participate in an informed and deliberative way in the collective life of our nation and the world.

A key reason is the decline of general education -- the prescribed portion of a student's work that falls outside their chosen major. With increased enrollment in technical fields such as business, engineering and computer science, general education represents the best and last chance for students to discuss and debate broad human problems with their peers. Far too few institutions are giving them this precious opportunity.

Letters to the Editor

A reader has submitted
a response to this essay.

You can view the letter [here](#) [1],
and find all of our [Letters to
the Editor here](#) [2].

Some Common Understanding

The concept of general education first arose at elite institutions roughly a century ago. After World War I left millions of people dead in a ruined Europe, Columbia University established a compulsory course for incoming students called Introduction to Contemporary Civilization. The hope was that by contending with searching works of literature, history and philosophy, students would leave college better prepared to meet their responsibilities in a fragile democracy.

After the cataclysm of World War II, Harvard University issued a report entitled “[General Education in a Free Society](#)” [3]. In a “centrifugal culture in extreme need of unifying forces,” the authors aimed to give students “some common and binding understanding of the society which they will possess.” Courses on world religions, transformative ideas in politics and science, and drama from ancient Greek playwrights to the modern theater became part of the college experience not just at Harvard but also around the nation.

During the tumultuous Vietnam years, most institutions dismantled their general education curricula, and the new norm became “distribution requirements,” whereby students picked a few courses more or less at random outside their majors from an ever-proliferating list. The eminent sociologist Daniel Bell called the distribution model “an admission of intellectual defeat” -- by which he meant that faculty had given up

trying to agree on what students should learn beyond preparation for a chosen career. By the mid-1970s, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching described general education as a “disaster area,” and so it has largely remained ever since.

Multiple forces drove those developments. Many faculty members, increasingly rewarded for their research productivity, came to regard teaching introductory classes as distracting or demeaning. Students and faculty justifiably challenged traditions and hierarchies by which women, minorities and non-Western voices had long been degraded or excluded. In such a charged context, achieving consensus about what a common intellectual experience for students should be became almost impossible. The idea of college as a shared enterprise for preparing young people for democratic citizenship all but collapsed.

These trends continued unabated and are now accelerating with the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis. As the price of college rises, debt burdens grow and the job market contracts, students are understandably wary of anything that might deflect or delay their pursuit of a marketable degree. “Hard” subjects with employment prospects such as the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields are thriving, while “soft” subjects, primarily the humanities, are widely regarded as luxuries affordable only to the affluent.

The Purdue Experiment

When David A. Reingold, a sociologist trained at the University of Chicago, arrived in 2015 as the new dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Purdue University, he encountered the problem firsthand. Fewer than 10 percent of recent Purdue graduates had taken a single course in literature, and only 7 percent had taken a course in American history.

Reingold convened a faculty task force, and, under the leadership of Melinda Zook, a distinguished scholar of women's history, Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts was launched. The program began with a two-semester course sequence for first-year students organized around "transformative texts" -- those that have changed the world and still have the power to transform individual lives.

Readings range from Thucydides, Shakespeare, Isaac Newton, Mary Shelley and Abraham Lincoln to Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin, Gabriel García Márquez, Chinua Achebe, Simone de Beauvoir, Eudora Welty and Eileen Chang, as well as essential religious texts including the Bible, Quran and Bhagavad Gita. In classes capped at 30 students, faculty members select half the texts from a collaboratively developed list of about 200 works that give students a shared vocabulary for thinking and talking with their peers about perennial problems -- the joys and risks of freedom, the distinction between love and desire, the inevitability of loss and mourning -- that feel fiercely present in their own lives. The other half may be works of each professor's own choosing and of comparable power, including by living writers on urgent issues of our time.

Cornerstone is not compulsory but one of several options at Purdue for meeting existing general education requirements. Its significant innovation is to take existing requirements in writing and public speaking -- almost universal in higher education today -- and allow students to fulfill them by writing and speaking about challenging books and ideas.

Beyond the Transformative Texts course, students wishing to earn a Cornerstone certificate along with their bachelor's degree may pursue upper-level courses grouped under such topics as Technology and Society, Environment and Sustainability or Management and Organization. These courses connect humanistic questions to majors in business or STEM. Cornerstone began with a small-scale pilot in the

fall of 2017. Three years later, it enrolls over 2,000 students each semester, of whom more than 80 percent are intending to major in STEM fields.

The Cornerstone Classroom

The Cornerstone classroom is a rehearsal space for democracy. By entering the world of transformative texts, students find that the boundaries of race, gender and cultural difference can be crossed by exercising the sympathetic imagination. They discover, in the words of Herman Melville, that “genius all over the world stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round,” and that the circle includes writers of all cultures and perspectives on the human and natural world.

Students who read Plato on philosopher kings and Confucius on sage rulers will be struck by how much the two writers had in common even though they came from worlds apart. Students who encounter Immanuel Kant’s “categorical imperative” that human beings be treated as ends rather than as means will discover that Kant’s idea finds searing expression in novels about the Black American experience by Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison. Students who encounter W. E. B. Du Bois’s prophecy that “the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color-line” will experience their own shock of recognition at its tragic persistence in our own century.

At a moment when anxiety among college students is rising and time for reflection is scarce, Cornerstone gives students a chance to explore together -- in the words of Zook -- enduring questions about “life and love and suffering and justice” with the help of compelling works about the human condition.

Learning for Living

Encouraged by the Purdue experiment, the Teagle Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, in consultation with an advisory council of distinguished and diverse teacher-scholars, are launching Cornerstone: Learning for Living ^[4], a joint initiative to revive general education. We will commit at least \$7 million over the next five years to this effort.

Recognizing that every institution has its own structures and traditions, we do not expect to see the Cornerstone idea replicated in every detail on every campus. But we do believe that a coherent general education program committed to diversity in readings and faculty should play a vital role for students at every type of college, including four-year institutions focused on business and STEM as well as two-year community colleges with an emphasis on career training.

General education reform not only makes intellectual and psychological sense for students; it also makes financial sense for institutions. At many colleges, curricula have become too expensive because they have become too expansive. In the long run, colleges cannot support large cohorts of full-time faculty who teach exclusively in departments where enrollments are sparse. Humanities faculty are already an endangered species. If they do not commit to teaching students outside their own disciplines through general education, they risk becoming extinct.

The time for reimagining general education is now. The pandemic and the resurgent movement for racial justice raise many deep questions about the power of words and symbols for good or ill, the burden of our history for people of color, the responsibility of individuals for the welfare of others and the problem of ambiguity in the realm of science -- to name just a few issues.

We need college students to bring both knowledge and empathy to these problems. We need college graduates who speak with civility, listen with respect and know the difference between assertion and

argument -- and we need them now. Cornerstone: Learning for Living is a start.

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[3] <https://archive.org/details/generaleducation032440mbp/page/n5>

[4] <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/Calls-for-Proposals/Initiatives/Cornerstone>

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