Chapter 5

Strengthening General Education to Prepare Students for Today and Tomorrow

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ABSTRACT

There is increasing skepticism in the United States about the value of higher education, and some of this skepticism is focused on general education. General education is an extremely important part of the undergraduate experience, but in many cases, it has failed to adapt to current needs. Three challenges that many general education programs face include its disconnect from the institutional mission, a lack of opportunities for students to integrate what they have learned, and an unclear articulation of general education's benefits. This chapter highlights some ways that these challenges are being addressed.

INTRODUCTION

There is increasing skepticism in the United States about the value of higher education, especially the undergraduate degree. In a recent Public Agenda survey, 51% of respondents agreed that a college education is a questionable investment because of its excessive cost and the limited job opportunities resulting from completing a degree (Brink, 2022).[1] One sign of this skepticism is that many states are reducing degree requirements for state positions. During his first full day in office as Pennsylvania governor, Josh Shapiro's signed an executive order that stated: "Effective immediately,

92% of state government jobs — about 65,000 positions — do not require a four-year college degree" (Governor Josh Shapiro, 2023). Corporations are also eliminating degree requirements and moving towards skills-based hiring (Mearian, 2022).

Another pressure on higher education is related to demographics. Often referred to as the enrollment cliff, there is a dramatic decline in what have been called traditional-aged students, although this term is less accurate these days given the increased number of adult students who pursue degrees. There is expected to be a drop in overall numbers of high school graduates beginning in 2025 due to lower birth rates during the Great Recession (Drozdowski, 2023). Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) that rely on this pool of students for enrollment will experience increased competition for a shrinking pool of potential applicants. Another demographic challenge impacts IHEs regionally due to the movement from regions like the Northeast to the South and Southwest regions. An example of the impact of this enrollment dip can be found in Pennsylvania where enrollment has declined by 47% since 2010 at Penn State New Kensington. It is even worse at Penn State Shenango, where enrollment has declined 61% since 2010 (Schnacker, 2023).

To compete in this environment, IHEs will have to make their educational experiences more appealing to prospective students. The Public Agenda survey mentioned above highlights concerns with IHEs ability to adapt to the needs of the present and future. Sixty-six percent of respondents agreed that colleges are "stuck in the past" and that they "do not meet the needs of the current student population" (Brink, 2022). One of the ways many believe that colleges are stuck in the past is the time it takes to complete a degree, and some see general education as one of the primary reasons for this. Students often complain about general education requirements as they do not see their relevance to their life after graduation, especially in terms of employment. Students also dislike that general education requirements delays their study of the disciplines they have chosen as their majors. Ravana Gumm, a student finishing her first year at the University of Indiana, articulated these concerns. She writes:

College is meant to be a place where students can choose their course of study and set themselves up for their future careers. Why should I, as a PR journalism student, be required to take science and math courses that are not very relevant to the field at all? Why should a STEM major need to take an English composition course that is like the high school English courses they took for four years? Having to make room in my schedule and pay for classes that I don't want to take is the antithesis of what college is meant to be all about. (Gumm, 2023)

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