

BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM

THE JAMES G.
MARTIN
CENTER
FOR ACADEMIC
RENEWAL

General Education

“In an age of increasing individualism, vocational specialization, and intensifying societal polarization set against an environment of decreasing trust in society’s institutions... programs of general education — both in the high schools and in the universities — may be the single remaining force that can fit the population together as citizens who share a common heritage and culture. If we accept this is indeed an appropriate aim and outcome of education, and in particular general education, then the relevance and value of general education to society is truly immense, indispensable, and indisputable. Conversely, if general education fails to serve those purposes, or worse, if it is used as a vehicle to instill ideas and values that are anathema to society’s prevailing culture, institutions, and traditions — theory presented here suggests the consequences may be profound.”

—Kevin D. Gwaltney, executive director, Missouri General Assembly Joint Committee on Education¹

Why should general education be reformed?

Student learning should be at the center of all efforts to reform higher education. The content of student learning heavily influences the kinds of thinkers and citizens graduates will become. The surest way to improve the quality of education for the greatest number of students is through general education. This is because all students must complete their institution’s general education requirements. This curriculum, which consists of about 30 percent of a four-year education, can

significantly shape students’ intellectual formation.²

Unfortunately, the general education programs at too many institutions are poorly designed and fail to give students a coherent grounding in essential knowledge. The approach to general education is often skills-focused and content-neutral. The specific content of students’ studies is not a primary concern for most university administrators. As long as students develop generic skills such as “critical thinking” and take an assortment of courses from broad subject areas, curriculum administrators are satisfied.

1. Kevin D. Gwaltney, “General Education Requirements: A Look at the Structure of Higher Education,” the Missouri General Assembly Joint Committee on Education, Aug. 19, 2020.

2. To read more from the Martin Center about the importance of general education, visit: <https://www.jamesmartin.center/tag/general-education/>

Such programs do a disservice to students on multiple levels.

From the standpoint of cognitive science, students need a sturdy backbone of knowledge in order to learn. Skills are not developed in the abstract; they are the product of students' building a store of connected background knowledge. A disparate accumulation of random facts will not give students the firm foundation needed for effective learning.

An unstructured program also produces personal and cultural consequences. It enables faculty to require overtly ideological or excessively narrow courses. And the lack of structure leads students to make poor choices when selecting their coursework.

General education programs, however, also present an opportunity. When properly designed, general education is an ideal time to give students a rich foundation of knowledge they can build on for the rest of their lives. A program emphasizing shared essential knowledge would require students to take broad survey courses in core fields such as history, literature, philosophy, civics, and science. It would aid them in building a mental timeline of their civilization's key events and the development of its central ideas, giving them wisdom and perspective when confronting contemporary issues. Students would learn to appreciate how the various branches of knowledge are connected, or "intimately united," as described by John Henry Newman.³ Such a coherent and culturally rich education would enable students to become rigorous thinkers and wise citizens prepared to lead. Colleges and universities must not miss this opportunity. True general education reform is possible and should be at the top of their priority list.

3. John Henry Newman, *Idea of a University*, Aeterna Press (July 9, 2015), p. 75.

Recommendations

The Martin Center recommends that legislatures, university boards, and faculty governing committees take steps to improve general education programs in colleges and universities.

Universities should:

- Pass a university-wide policy adopting a liberal arts-focused general education curriculum. The curriculum should give students a coherent and meaningful education in the history, works, and civic culture of the West, particularly of the United States. The following is a model curriculum:
 - A 3 semester credit hour course of Rhetoric and English Composition,
 - A 3 semester credit hour Mathematics Required Course (Precalculus, Mathematical Logic, Probability, Introduction to Statistics, or Calculus I),
 - A 4 semester credit hour Laboratory Science Required Course (Introduction to Biology, Introduction to Chemistry, or Introduction to Physics),
 - A 3 semester credit hour survey course of Western History I 3000 B.C.-1450,
 - A 3 semester credit hour survey course of Western History II 1450 to 2000,
 - A 3 semester credit hour survey course of United States History I 1607-1877,
 - A 3 semester credit hour course of United States Government,
 - A 3 semester credit hour course of United States Literature I 1607-1914,

- A 3 semester credit hour course of Introduction to Economics,
- A 3 semester credit hour course of one of the following courses:
 - Founding Ideas of Western Liberty,
 - Founding Traditions of Western Art, or
 - Founding Ideas of Western Economics
- A 4 semester credit hour course of Western Humanities I 1000 B.C.-1450,
- A 4 semester credit hour course of Western Humanities II 1450-1950, and
- A 3 semester credit hour survey course of World Civilizations.

- Limit the number of courses that can be counted toward general education requirements.
- Eliminate and prohibit “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) or “critical race theory” (CRT) based general education requirements.

Model University Policies

- [Board of Regents Policy Manual: Policies on General Education: 3.3.1 Core Curriculum: Core IMPACTS](#)

The University System of Georgia stands out for having a university-wide policy on general education requirements. The policy requires students to fulfill distribution requirements such as “Political Science & U.S. History,” “Mathematics & Quantitative Skills,” and “Arts, Humanities & Ethics.” It could be further improved by articulating which kinds of courses can fulfill each distribution requirement.

Policymakers should:

- Adopt and implement legislation based on [the General Education Act](#).
- Require state universities to implement the 42-semester credit hour curriculum outlined above.
- Include a course on American history or government in the general education programs of public institutions.
- Prohibit mandatory “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) or “critical race theory” (CRT) based general education requirements.

Model Legislation

- [The General Education Act](#), the National Association of Scholars, the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, and the Ethics and Public Policy Center
- [The Core Curriculum Act](#), the National Association of Scholars
- [Freedom From Indoctrination Act](#), the Goldwater Institute, Speech First

Further Reading

From the Martin Center:

- [Making General Education Meaningful](#) by Shannon Watkins (September 29, 2023)
- [Many NC Students Are Missing out on Core Knowledge](#) by Ashlynn Warta (December 27, 2021)
- [North Carolina Colleges Shouldn’t Confuse Cafeteria-Style Curriculum with Strong Liberal Arts](#) by Christian Barnard (June 24, 2019)
- [The Four Perspectives of Higher Education Policy Explained](#) by Jay Schalin (December 5, 2018)

- [UNC's New Gen Ed Proposal Reflects Major Philosophical Shift from Knowledge to Process](#) by Shannon Watkins (December 18, 2017)
- [Study Only What You Want? Not If You Want to Be Successful](#) by Shannon Watkins (July 24, 2017)
- [Worthwhile Reform or Vain Endeavor?](#) by Jesse Saffron (March 21, 2014)
- [Too General, Not Enough Education](#) by Jay Schalin (May 13, 2014)
- [General Education at NC State](#) by Jay Schalin (2014)
- [No Core Curriculum Here](#) by Jane S. Shaw (October 29, 2013)
- [General Education at UNC-Chapel Hill](#) by Jay Schalin and Jenna A. Robinson (2013)
- [General Education Smorgasbord Offers Mostly Junk Food](#) by George Leef (September 16, 2008)

Other Sources:

- [Recentering Our Universities](#) (Video), the National Association of Scholars, the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, and the Ethics and Public Policy Center
- [What Will They Learn? 2022-2023](#)

For More Information

For supplemental data or additional research on this topic, please contact the Martin Center by phone or email. You can reach us at 919-828-1400 or info@jamesgmartin.center.

To read more from the Martin Center about the importance of general education, visit: <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/tag/general-education>

About the Martin Center

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

We advocate responsible governance, viewpoint diversity, academic quality, cost-effective education solutions, and innovative market-based reform. We do that by studying and reporting on critical issues in higher education and recommending policies that can create change—especially at the state and local level.

THE JAMES G. 
MARTIN CENTER
 FOR ACADEMIC RENEWAL

353 E. Six Forks Road Suite 200
 Raleigh, NC 27609

919.828.1400

Fax: 919.828.7455

www.jamesgmartin.center