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General Education Reform At A Community College A Grounded Theory Study

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GENERAL EDUCATION REFORM AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

The attempts to reform general education programs in higher education have been applied and studied throughout the history of higher education in the United States, but with even greater frequency and urgency over the past fifty years. Countless studies show the high percentage of institutions participating in these efforts and further studies lament the state of general education both as a reason to initiate reforms and as a result of the reforms. This effort is difficult enough for universities, but is further complicated when the curriculum for general education is part of a community college degree program.

A grounded theory study was conducted to identify the underlying understanding of general education at one community college as well as the process for implementing and reforming the curriculum, especially the general education curriculum. Members of the curriculum committee as well as other administrators and faculty at the college who have a voice in the curriculum were interviewed and their responses were coded following classic grounded theory methodology.

The resulting theory showed a divergence of understanding of general education when speaking about it abstractly and when speaking about the process to change the college's existing general education program. The abstract understanding of general education is very consistent with the stated purposes of general education and the educational goals of the college. The practical understanding, however, indicates that the work of curriculum reform is compliance with guidelines from legislation and accreditation requirements. Thus, any efforts to establish a model of general education that would be more consistent with the understood purpose of general education that would require modifying the existing structure would meet great

resistance because of the perceived need to comply with the existing model. Further studies concerning the same issue at other community colleges within the state, as well as the understanding of general education within the university system would contribute to a better understanding of the role of general education at the college and throughout the state system of higher education. The use of grounded theory as a methodology to achieve this reform provides a way to engage everyone involved more openly and to permit the efforts to be far more intentional.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, institutions of higher education in the United States have been undertaking the reform of their curriculum and in particular that part of the curriculum known as general education. As a result, there has been a constant stream of articles and studies which have focused on the success (or more often than not on the perceived failure) of these efforts. As recently as 2007, Harvard, an institution which is prominent in the history of general education, turned its attention to its general education program (just as it had in 1945 and in the 1970's) as a critical part of the undergraduate curriculum that it claims will only be effective if the other elements of the curriculum are working in concert with it (Menand & Simmons, 2007). Despite these efforts, however, the vast majority of studies of the efforts to reform general education indicate that general education is in a state of disarray; it has as many definitions, purposes in the curriculum, and models for improvement as there are those who study it. The philosophical and political agendas of those who undertake the studies often color their perspective and their findings. Through all out his, one thing remains consistently held: general education is in need of reform. One can only wonder why so many well intentioned efforts have failed. What needs to be done is a careful analysis of the variables and elements which impact such an undertaking. In other words, how is the process of reforming general education understood?

The first element which informs a process of addressing this problem is the question of what general education is and what its role in the curriculum of higher education is. Differing

versions of curricular structures have arisen over the years under the title of general education, but have done so under a variety of circumstances and to address very different deficiencies within the curriculum. One thing is clear: the general education movement began as an attempt to correct a perceived deficiency within the curriculum (Dressel and Mayhew, 1954; Abrahamson and Kimsey, 2002). The problem of overspecialization and of too narrow a curriculum for expanding fields of study, to a greater need for access and student options have combined at different times to support a reform of the university's curriculum to better serve the needs of the institution (Lattuca and Stark, 2009). The various understandings of the mission of the university as well as the underlying philosophical assumptions about knowledge and learning (Short, 2002) have also colored the attempts to reform the curriculum in general with general education as the critical variable.

An additional element is added to the reform efforts when the institution undertaking the reform is a community college. Much like general education, the understanding of the community college is often assumed to be consistent, even by a cohort of community colleges in a singular system. This is especially the case for the community colleges in the state of Florida at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Recent changes in state statute (FS 1004.87, 2009) and in Department of Education rules (Florida DOE Rule 6A-14) have changed the expressed mission and role of the community college in this system. No longer called a community college system, the new state college system allows two year community colleges to offer the four year baccalaureate degree (with necessary changes in structure, curriculum, and support services for the state and the accrediting body). While the understanding and mission of the community colleges in Florida shift, the impact on general education reform is significant since general

education is often shifted to the first two years of the undergraduate degree and that is provided by the community colleges (Gaff, 1983). The combinations of an assumed shared definition of general education, a variable understanding of the role of general education in the higher education curriculum, and a changing role of the community college creates the perfect storm for undermining reform efforts of even the best intentioned institutions.

Research Question

What is the underlying theory which guides the process of formulating, reforming, and implementing the general education program at a community college? Elements which will be addressed in this study include what the understanding of the role of general education is at the community college and who or what should guide the implementation of that program. How much of the process of designing and implementing general education is influenced by external agencies and how much is controlled by the faculty at the community college?

Definition of Terms

General education: an aspect of the undergraduate curriculum which has been defined differently at different times, ranging from the breadth of the curriculum, to the core or common curriculum, the liberal dimension of the curriculum; a part of the undergraduate curriculum which tries to anchor the curriculum to the mission of the institution. Following Gaff (1983), it is understood to:

- Be rooted in the liberal tradition

- Stress breadth in the curriculum and give students familiarity across disciplines
- Strive to integrate and connect knowledge
- Give an appreciation of the culture of the students as well as other cultures
- Examine values, relevant both to current issues and disciplinary studies
- Require mastery of skills required for lifelong learning
- Develop personal qualities such as tolerance of ambiguity, empathy, and an expanded self view.

Liberal education: According to Newman (1996) the "process of training, by which the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own object, and for its own highest culture" (p. 107). Much like general education, liberal education is a term which means several things in different context, but it usually is what is considered to be the answer to the question what does it mean to be an educated individual (Mulcahy, 2009).

Civic education: A critical part of the undergraduate mission to give students the knowledge and skills they need to be responsible citizens in a democratic society.

Core curriculum: the common set of courses required for all students, regardless of their major. These courses are seen as essential to any educational program (Jones & Ratcliff, 1991).

Distribution curriculum: in some sense, the opposite of the core curriculum; a set of courses arranged in categories from which a student may choose to create the curriculum for their degree. This is a concession toward the core curriculum and away from the practical consequences of Eliot's elective system which would allow a student to select the courses they felt appropriate for their studies. A concern was raised when students at the same university could earn the same degree without having taken any of the same courses (Thomas, 1962).

There are certain concepts related to grounded theory which are important to understand (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Glaser, 1992). These include:

Open coding: the first step in the constant comparative approach of grounded theory in which the researcher identifies broad concepts in the data

Memos: short notes kept by the researcher as a record of preliminary analysis, thoughts, questions, insights, and possible directions for further study

Concepts: labels placed on discrete happenings, events, and other instances of phenomena

Category: a unit of information composed of events, happenings, and instances.

Properties: the characteristics or attributes of a category

Theoretical coding: a process of moving the concepts uncovered in the open coding into a framework revealing the conceptual relationships between concepts

Hypotheses: the ongoing, emerging relationships identified between categories; these are always suggestive and are verified with additional research

Emergence: the way in which the theory develops gradually as a result of the interactive analysis of the data (constant comparative analysis). Glaser and Strauss also refer to this process as integration (1967/2009, p. 40).

Theoretical saturation: the point at which it is clear that no additional data will be found to develop a category

Theory: a set of well developed concepts with explicit relationships which constitute a framework that both explains and predicts phenomena

Delimitations and Limitations

This study, utilizing grounded theory, is a type of qualitative study and it is essential to note that generalizability is not the goal, but rather an accurate assessment of the underlying theory guiding this process in this instance. What is sought is a deeper understanding of the theory guiding the actual work of curriculum development and reform at this particular college. To expand the findings of this study beyond this particular college would be beyond the scope of this methodology. Rather than looking for generalizability, Glaser suggests that the more appropriate judgment of the study should be "its ability to fit, work, and be relevant" (Glaser, 1992, p. 117). It is understood that any application of a grounded theory study to another situation would require some modification of the theory to accommodate fit and relevance in the new circumstances; the theory will only "work" in the different circumstances if the data support such a claim. This modifiability is not seen as a weakness of grounded theory, but in fact its strength and relevance for studies. It is also for this reason that only one institution is being studied. To compare two or more institutions would give a generalized view of a process that is

not use by any one of the institutions studied in particular. The task of curriculum reform, guided by external forces such as accreditation agencies, board of trustees, and state regulations, is basically institutionally specific.

Another claim often made of studies is that they need be replicable by others to be valid. Glaser (1992) suggests that this too ignores the fundamental strength of grounded theory as a methodology and ignores what grounded theory is attempting to do. Rather than attempt to reproduce the study, subsequent studies should employ the same careful methodology used in any grounded theory study to allow the current theory to emerge based on the data available at that time. Theory is as fluid as the realities that exist at the time of the study. One should expect a different theory to emerge under different circumstances.

The college that is being studied is the work place of the investigator and as such faces all of the limits of any backyard study. First and foremost, measures will be taken to assure that the responses given by those interviewed are reflective of their beliefs and not answers that are perceived to be what the investigator expects. Because of the researcher's role at the college, no one who is a direct report to the investigator will be included in the sample; this will avoid any conflict of interest guiding the responses, that is, the fear of respondents answering in what they perceive to be what the researcher wants to hear. This is a danger of any study using interviews or grounded theory methodology and is not exclusively a feature of the setting of the study. Even if the study were to be conducted at another institution, the concern with participants giving what they perceive to be the "right" answers must be addressed. Second, the methodology will be carefully followed to prevent the investigator's own assumptions and biases from unduly guiding the generation of the theory. This is a reflection of the accusation leveled against

grounded theory that it is subject to "Baconian inductivism" (Haig, 1995); the approach to grounded theory requires an orienting theory out of which categories are drawn and defined. The methodology does not attempt to validate this foundational theory, but rather elicits the theory which underlies the process studied.

Significance of the Study

As a critical component of the curriculum in American higher education, general education is a program which is constantly under review and reform. Efforts to create an effective reform continue to flounder seemingly because a clear understanding of the purpose of general education is not explicitly defined. At present, it appears that many institutions begin their reform with the assumption that everyone has a fundamental agreement about the nature and ends of general education in the curriculum. Is there consensus of understanding among the principal agents in the process of reform of general education at any particular institution or does there exist conflicting understandings of general education, its purposes and policies, and the interpretations of those who enact that curriculum?

The purpose of this study is to explore the process of reforming of the general education program and its assessment at one large, urban community college in central Florida in order to formulate the supporting understanding and theory of general education which guides this process at this particular institution. This qualitative grounded theory study will examine the perceptions of those involved in the process at every level, beginning with the curriculum committee, whose explicit charge is to establish and reform the college's curriculum, through the administrators at the college, to the faculty members at large (those beyond the current

membership of the curriculum committee). The primary goal of this grounded theory study is to formulate a theory, grounded on the experience of those involved in the process and documented in the data collected from the research participants, of the understanding of general education and the process which leads to the reform of the general education program. Those who would benefit most directly from this study would be the faculty who own the curriculum at the college and are responsible for its implementation, as well as the institution at which the study is conducted. A clear understanding of the process of reforming general education will make that process more authentic and directly linked to the mission of the college.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The roots of the general education program in the undergraduate curriculum go back to the origins of the higher education in the United States with the founding of Harvard in 1636. It is not, however, until 1945 and the publication of the report of the Harvard Committee that this program was seen as a unique component of higher education curriculum needing reform and ongoing updating. Since the release of that Harvard Report (*General Education in a Free Society*), there have been many major reports and studies which have indicated that education in general and general education in particular were in crisis as well as countless examinations of general education as a program within the curriculum. This ongoing examination of general education takes a different bent when placed in the setting of the nation's community colleges and it is less examined at this level.

Since general education considered as a program of study is a specifically American phenomenon, we need look at the development of the university within the United States to see placement of general education in that system. For the sake of brevity, three moments in that history will be considered as pivotal. These three moments might over simplistically be seen as shifts in admission criteria: from conditions based on aristocracy, a shift to a meritocracy, and finally an emphasis democracy. This is placed in the context of Rudolph's understanding of curriculum, which he says is "nothing less than the statement a college makes about what, out of the totality on man's constantly growing knowledge and experience, is considered useful, appropriate, or relevant to the lives of educated men and women at a certain point in time" (1977, p. xxi). These moments are points at which the curriculum was seen to be deficient in some way and an effort to reform it gave us general education.

Missions of Higher Education

The origins of higher education in the United States goes back to the founding of Harvard in 1636 with a curriculum built on the assumption that college was to hand on existing knowledge. Those who enrolled were the sons of the well to do and powerful who were destined to continue their families' success and fine breeding. Once enrolled, all students took the same courses since everyone needed to learn the same things to graduate. The classics were considered critical for professionals matriculating from college and the reason for attending college was to prepare to become a lawyer, a doctor, or a minister. The model found in Europe was imported (Emmanuel College at Cambridge served as the model for Harvard and built its curriculum upon the seven liberal arts (Cohen, 1998, p. 30)). All students took the same sequence of courses with Ethics courses taught by university presidents to seniors as something of a capstone course. At this time, there would be no distinctive general education curriculum at the universities; the common base of knowledge needed for college graduates was to be taught in the secondary schools. Ironically, it will be Harvard's president Eliot who, in 1884, introduced the idea of the elective system which led to the decentralization of the curriculum and a higher degree of specialization within distinct academic departments. In this regard, it has been suggested that the understanding of general education at Harvard has served as a flag ship for the rest of American universities.

Perhaps as a reaction against a university model that favored an elite group and thus seemed quite undemocratic, or maybe as a desire to have university education serve a more utilitarian function, the NEA Committee of Ten (chaired by Eliot of Harvard) published a report in 1892 which actually was focused on the college prep curriculum in secondary schools

(National Education Association, 1893). The universities wanted to make clear that the preparation needed for students who were university bound needed to be less focused on the classical preparation which had served students so well in the past. The students needed to be better prepared for a university curriculum which was becoming more diverse and less restricted to few vocations. The students who were to enter the university were coming there seeking more diverse occupations than the select few professions of earlier times. There was also a sense that not all students would be going on to university, but those who were prepared accordingly in secondary schools would move forward (they also earned this right to attend college, an approach of meritocracy). As university faculty became more specialized and the courses they deemed necessary for preparation within that discipline grew in number, students needed to have more foundational preparation in the secondary setting. The needs of the curriculum at the university were becoming more utilitarian and focused on vocationalism to meet the growing needs of society at the time. This struggle between those who held that the classical educational model was critical and those who were looking for more specialized and targeted training would persist throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. It will be shaped by those who held for a core curriculum and those more disposed to a distribution model. At this time, however, there was a move away from a common core of courses required of all students; instead, students selected courses based upon their desired degree.

At the very end of the Second World War, American society was experiencing a shift in its perception and its understanding of the educational needs of its citizens. The Harvard Report of 1945, *General Education in a Free Society*, (also called the Red book) called for general education reform as a need of a democratic society. The idea that education should be reserved

for a few or that a liberal education was needed only by ruling class or aristocracy was rejected and thus, the curriculum needed a new model to meet the needs of the times. Admission requirements were examined in the report to reflect the reality that students were no longer coming from a common source and were not coming with a common preparatory curriculum. There then needed to be a common core at Harvard, the general education requirement. General education was meant to serve as common courses that all college educated students should have been exposed to in their career. This report, much like that of 1892, speaks mainly about general education in secondary schools, but in turning its attention to Harvard itself establishes the model common today. The curriculum should not be built upon core or block of classes required of all students to get out of the way, but instead, a series of six of the sixteen courses required for bachelor's degree should be general education. To achieve this, the report speaks of one course from humanities, one from social science and one in science taken in first two years. The scope of these courses was meant to help students choose specialization and they were to be limited to survey courses alone. The basis was meant to be a broad overview and not compensation for deficiencies in secondary education preparation for college: "General education should not be confused with elementary education" (Harvard, 1945, p. 198). Instead, what emerged was a model in which any course that the faculty and the committee on general education felt would benefit the student in their major was accepted into the general education program.

The mission of institutions of higher education have shifted significantly in the United States over the past thirty plus years and these changes have not developed organically like the different layers of an onion, interconnected and unified. Instead, it has been more like a snowball rolling down a hillside, picking up any element that crosses its path and adding it to the

other elements whether related or even contradictory. The attempt to diversify the curriculum by introducing majors was offset with the idea of a core curriculum required of all, regardless of major. The free elective dimension of the curriculum sought to permit students to develop a custom plan of study, suitable to their own interests. Combined, the common core of knowledge was spread over countless elective courses without any integrating features. To suggest the removal of one of these elements as no longer relevant to contemporary curriculum, even in the face of evident contradictions, does not ever seem to be a viable option. Accordingly, the curriculum of higher education continues to be reformed and shaped with good intentions working within a troubled, if not flawed, structure.

Community Colleges

To understand the place of general education within the community college, one must place the emergence of this part of higher education in an historical context. The idea of a junior college (later to be the community college) has its origins (according to most) at the University of Chicago in 1892 when then President William Rainey Harper separated the upper and lower divisions into the Academic Colleges and the University Colleges (the Junior and Senior colleges). In 1901, the lower divisions were renamed Joliet Junior College (Witt, et al., 1994). This birth linked the role of the lower division to the desired outcomes of the upper division in terms of curriculum development. There was an expressed expectation that the junior colleges would provide the foundational knowledge upon which the upper divisions would build. In particular, the general education program would provide the foundation upon which the upper division courses would be built. There are some, however, who believe that the original

intention of the establishment of the junior college by Harper was not so much to provide a pathway to more students into college, but instead to compensate for the lack of rigor in secondary education, thus preparing students for college level work or effectively weeding them out of consideration for college work (Erdman & Ogden, 2000).

The community colleges system in the state of Florida enters the history of higher education more recently with the recommendation, in 1947, of the Florida Citizens Committee on Education to create junior colleges in conjunction with the local school districts. This recommendation was incorporated into the Minimum Foundation Program Law and enacted in 1947 by the legislature. Four private colleges which pre-dated this legislation were taken over by the local districts and became the first of the twenty-eight community colleges serving the state of Florida. From their inception, community colleges have had the need for general education placed in their charge and their very definition. What has made this investigation of general education reform an interesting study is the change in the charge of the community colleges over the years and the understanding of the role of general education attempting to keep pace with these changes. What is in place now is an undefined relationship between the role of the community college and the place of general education programs to meet those needs. If this understanding of general education's role for the mission of the community college could be made explicit, efforts to align the general education program with the desired outcomes for the community college graduate would be both easier and more effective.

The issue of general education is not one that is simply a matter of curriculum. Turning our attention now to the specific case of a community college within the state of Florida, it seems as if there are four major sources of policy which guide the development, implementation, and

reform of general education. The first is the statute in state law which defines the structure of the general education program for all publically funded colleges and universities within the state. The second is the rules put forward by the Florida Department of Education. Third is the set of comprehensive standards as set forth by the national accrediting body, in this case the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Finally, each college has its own policies which impact the general education core. Each of these policies has a direct impact on the process of general education reform and are an important element of the underlying assumptions and theory guiding that reform.

General Education

In 2001, the Association of American Colleges and Universities published a report entitled *The Status of General Education in the year 2000: Summary of a National Survey* (Ratcliff, et al., 2001). In it, the authors summarized the data collected in two surveys, the GE2000 (General Education 2000) and the CAO 2000 (Chief Academic Officers 2000). What is most telling in this report is the emphasis on the importance of general education in the undergraduate collegiate experience. The chief academic officers who participated reported quite favorably on the progress made at their institutions to design, publish, and present a coherent program of general education. What is more noteworthy, however, is the low percentage of those who believed there was adequate assessment of the goals of their renovated programs. Although more than half of the 159 institutions surveyed reported that their general education programs were under review, there was a wide range of understanding of what such a program might look like or achieve in the students' educational program.

This two-fold pattern of recognizing the importance of general education and then undertaking a reform of the existing curriculum is not new to the late twentieth century. It can be argued that general education came into existence as a program as a reaction to a curriculum that was seen to be inadequate; educators, responding to some criticism of education in their day, modified the general education curriculum to meet the needs of the critics, be they educators or society in general. A serious examination of this general education program has happened at three major points in the history of higher education in the United States: the late 1920's, the mid-1940's, and the 1970's (Boyer & Levine, 1981).

General Education at the Universities

Harvard is often looked to as the leading institution in general education reform and the Red Book set the precedent for this. In post World War II America, the concern of democracy coming under siege by totalitarian states was high and the recognition of the expansion of knowledge was daunting. Combined, these two issues challenged higher education to provide programs which both trained individuals for the highly specialized jobs which would await them, but also to instill the virtues and values critical to citizens. "…what is the right relationship between specialistic training, aiming at any one of a thousand different destinies, and education in a common heritage and toward a common citizenship on the other?" (Harvard, 1945, p. 5). To this end, the committee proposed the structure of undergraduate curriculum which is very common today: a distribution of courses across the disciplines most commonly associated with a liberal education, taken primarily in the first two years of the undergraduate program. The committee also struggled with the understanding that many of these courses really belong in the

secondary education system and that accommodating them in post-secondary is assuming the responsibility from its proper place.

This same concern was taken up in the study *Higher Education for American Democracy*, issued by the President's Commission on Higher Education, a committee commissioned in 1947 by President Truman to examine the state of higher education. While echoing the concern of the inadequacy of secondary education in many areas, it also reinforced the need for general education in the curriculum. The committee found that present programs of higher education were inadequate to prepare students for either their work or as citizens. The cause of this was simply explained: a curriculum that had become over specialized (Kennedy, 1952, p. 23). The solution was equally clear to the group: create a unified general education program which had as its focus not content, but performance and behavior in the graduates. This report, as well as the Red Book from Harvard, proposed to reshape curriculum to include a very coherent and comprehensive general education program, but both were severely limited by the faculty of institutions who placed great emphasis on their own disciplines (Rudolph, 1977).

In more recent history, this desire to reform general education has emerged as a curricular priority every decade or so. This cycle begins most notably in 1977 in the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching publication *Missions of the College Curriculum*. This work announced in its findings that general education is a "disaster area" (Carnegie,1977, p. 11) and serious alterations to the curriculum are called for. Boyer and Kaplan (1977) proposed a core curriculum be established within the undergraduate experience and the Harvard Task Force on the Core Curriculum in1978 also felt this was a necessary component of the undergraduate curriculum (Rockefeller, 1979).

In the early 1980's, more studies appeared which continued the lament of the horrid state of both general education and the attempt to reform it (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Gaff (1983) noted that the various organizations which studied general education did so from their own perspective and offered suggestions which were patently self serving: the President's Commission on Foreign Language emphasized the neglect of foreign language studies in the undergraduate curriculum; the Commission on Humanities found the study of humanities was fragmented; the National Science Foundation observed the poor training in science and math of American graduates as compared to the rest of the world; and so the emphasis at the beginning of the 1980's was a coherence in the general education curriculum. This was also the message of the Association of America College's *Integrity in the College Curriculum* (1985) which noted that "the curriculum has given way to a marketplace philosophy…" which "…refuses to establish common expectations and norms" (p. 2). The emphasis was on general education courses, especially in the first two years of the undergraduate experience (National Institute of Education, 1984) to bring about coherence in the curriculum. How this coherence was to be implemented differed from report to report, but all felt that general education was the vehicle by which this goal could be reached. William Bennett (1984), acting as the director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, called for a view similar to the Great Books tradition, but focusing more on classic Western values. Some years later, his successor called for coherence by increasing the number of courses taught in general education to a standard fifty hour block of core courses (Cheney, 1989). This approach was met with much resistance from those who were concerned about a too narrow view of the world, lacking in diversity, as well as by those who felt that it added an element of irrelevance to the curriculum (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Both the Task

Force on general education, acting under the auspices of the Association of American Colleges (Katz, 1988) and Boyer, leading the Carnegie Foundation study (1987) felt that a greater examination of the courses that are part of the general education distribution could organize them in such a way as to lead students to a greater sense of community and connectedness with the world at large. Boyer and Kaplan (1994) also reiterated their call for a core curriculum to give stability to the undergraduate curriculum and direction for general education. Numerous other studies (see Appendix E) during the 80's and 90's also reinforced the need for reform of general education while suggesting various approaches to achieve this end. The shift in the 1990's was to an assessment of the learning and the outcomes that were to be the result of the revisions in the general education programs at institutions. This is certainly the result of the greater sense of accountability which presented itself in higher education.

General Education at Community Colleges

There have also been some studies which have looked at general education as it has been implemented in community colleges. Rather than bringing clarity to the issue of general education, looking at it from a community college perspective introduces an entirely new range of considerations for general education from Thornton's (1966) view that community colleges have not accepted general education as a part of their mission, to Harlacher's (1982) suggestion of community general education for lifelong learners outside the academic for credit curriculum, to Cohen's (1978) assertion that it falls to community colleges to reform general education because other institutions of higher education have failed to do so.

As general education is linked to the mission of the institution, it should be no surprise that there was a mixture of interpretations of general education in the early community colleges, given the number of understandings of the role of these new institutions (Harrison, 1973). The pivotal work for identifying the importance of general education programs at the community college (as distinct from four-year colleges and universities) may be the *President's Report on Higher Education* of 1947 which, while addressing the needs of vocational education and the importance of two-year schools for this aim, spoke of the need for an element of general education in the vocational mission of the community and technical colleges (Kennedy, 1952, p. 33; Cohen & Brawer, 1982).

The state of California (which has an extensive community college system, serving one fourth of the community college students in the country today) has conducted many studies over the years, going back to 1941 when Tyler and McLaughlin reported that there was no common understanding in the junior colleges as to the purpose of general education in their curricula, a finding reinforced in the national survey of junior colleges conducted by Reynolds in 1946. In 1952, Johnson wrote an extensive study for the Carnegie Foundation and found that there was little development in the general education programs in California.

The reports from the 1950's noted that there had been little progress in general education programs in community colleges;, Cohen's *Case for General Education in Community Colleges* (1978) sounds as if it were written at that same time. He noted the need for a systematic development of a program which would not duplicate the learning at the secondary level, but ultimately creating good citizens. He believes that general education can be reformed if the college dedicates a single leader to this curricular program and that this builds upon the skills

needed for citizenship. A study conducted by the Carnegie Commission added to the confusion when it spelled out its preference for and the mission of a comprehensive community college as featuring "academic, occupational, and general education programs" (1970, p. 1), separating general education from the transfer academic programs. Conrad (1983) believes that each community college, in addition to committing to and performing a reform of general education, should clearly establish the curriculum in the context of the mission of the college. Historically, Conrad believes, this should lead general education to be an aspect of liberal education at the community college. Path and Hammons (1999) conducted a national survey which identified nine different approaches to general education at a random sample of community colleges and a persistent sense among the colleges surveyed that reform was still needed.

As we enter into the twenty-first century, the need for ongoing assessment is felt as well as the sense that general education reform is still needed. In May of 2009, Hart Research Associates published *Trends and Emerging Practices in General Education* in which 89% of the 433 institutions surveyed reported that they were in the process of reforming their general education program. The reform had led to a greater appreciation of engaged learning practices and a need to see common learning outcomes for all undergraduate students in their institution. Yet for all this, there is still no common understanding of what general education is and a firm conviction that it needs to be designed based on the institution's specific make up and mission.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is used when one is attempting to find the core concepts which contribute to the theory guiding the phenomenon under investigation. It does not attempt to build

on or validate existing theory; rather, it attempts to identify the actual theory driving the behavior of those involved (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Another way it has been described is as a "way of arriving at theory suited to its supposed uses" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009, p. 3). This qualitative approach draws upon various data including (but not limited to) interviews, policies, minutes, proceedings, and other documents which record the phenomenon from the perspective of those directly involved with it. It also requires theoretical sensitivity on the part of the researcher to insure that pre-conceived notions are not imposed upon the data, but rather, through the use of comparative analysis, the methodology generates a theory based upon the data. Grounded theory has been chosen for this study because it is able to identify the theory driving the actual changes in the general education program without beginning from the assumption that everyone understands what is at stake here and how to best achieve this outcome.

Grounded theory, at its inception, arose as a methodology within sociology, but was quickly seen to be valuable across many other disciplines such as "public health, sociology, political science, educational sociology, and nursing, as well as researchers and practitioners in fields that concern themselves with issues related to human behavior in organizations, groups, and other social configurations" (Glaser, 1992). Resistance to the implementation of this qualitative methodology within some of the social sciences, and especially education, may be the result of a shift in philosophical assumptions made by Glaser and the other Grounded Theorists. The fundamental assumption of the quantitative methodologies employed in the social sciences is the epistemology of absolute objectivity (Douglas, 1976). In this approach, the investigator employs a methodology which confirms or verifies the objective truths found in the data without

the taint of the subjectivity of the investigator. This process begins with a given theory of the events studied and looks for data to confirm the validity of the theory.

Many social scientists began to see a gap in the research which could only be filled with a methodology that would lead to the development of theories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967/2009; Conrad, 1982). What is sought is not the elimination of quantitative methodologies, but another approach which would supplement these approaches by providing a methodology that both acknowledges and utilizes the interdependence between the observer and the object being observed. Conrad (1982) suggests that not only does grounded theory avoid this antagonistic dualism (quantitative vs. qualitative methodologies), but provides a bridge between the mainstream research and the legitimate questions which can only be answered by an alternative approach.

This tension between the understanding of the validity quantitative research with scientific methods and the seeming subjectivity of this qualitative methodology even arose within the development of grounded theory. Strauss, who with Glaser had worked to develop the seminal work on grounded theory, wrote *Basics of Qualitative Research* with Corbin in which he added steps in the process of developing a grounded theory which would "provide some standardization and rigor to the process" (1990, p. 13). Glaser, alarmed that the original intent and strength of the grounded theory methodology was compromised, wrote a letter to Strauss asking him to pull the text, suggesting that what was presented in *Basics* was another methodology altogether. Needless to say, the book was not pulled and Glaser wrote *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis* (1992) and emphasized the basics of the theory which allow the theory under consideration to emerge rather than being forced (with a highly structured

methodology which imposes limits on the theoretical sensitivity at the heart of grounded theory). It is this approach, often referred to as classical grounded theory, which will be employed in this study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Design of the Study

While reviewing the literature on general education reform, I noted significant studies which verified the state of general education at any given time (Bell, 1966; Gaff, 1983; Miller, 1988; Ratcliff, Johnson, LaNasa, and Gaff, 2001). While these studies help to clarify the need for ongoing reform within general education programs, they did not address the question as to why a particular approach was used or how the process of reform was conducted at a particular institution, even those studied. This lack of supporting theoretical definition also impacts the current efforts to critically assess general education programs; assessments are designed to verify the specific need of those requiring the assessment and not necessarily determining if general education is designed to produce the outcomes required by a curricular plan (if there was one).

To overcome this perceived weakness of certain studies, this study utilizes the classic grounded theory approach to analyze the process of reforming the general education program at one community college. Creswell defines a grounded theory study as "a systematic, qualitative procedure used to generate a theory that explains, at a broad conceptual level, a process, an action, or interaction about a substantive topic" (2008, p. 439). Grounded theory, as a qualitative research methodology, provides a means to interpret the experiences of those involved in a process under study with the aim of revealing an underlying theory which explains and supports that process. First developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, this approach was used in sociology, but soon was seen to have a place in other disciplines including education.

This study focuses on the process of reforming general education at the study institution by examining the thoughts of the agents of that process, the curriculum committee, as well as the faculty and administrators of the college.

Sample Selection

The primary source of data was interviews of participants directly involved in the process of general education reform. Groups were selected based upon their theoretical relevance to the questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009). Beginning with lead faculty members and administrators guiding the process, a theoretical sampling approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to obtain sufficient data to achieve theoretical saturation of the categories identified. Similar to snowball sampling, interviews were sought from individuals who are in a position to contribute more insights into the underlying assumptions and theory driving general education reform. The first interviews, accordingly, were of faculty members who are currently on the curriculum committee and have undertaken the charge of mentoring the changes and revisions of general education at the college. The charge of the curriculum committee, according to the web site of the college is as follows. "The College Curriculum Committee is responsible for ensuring that all courses and programs have instructional integrity, address appropriate learning outcomes, fit into a sequential framework that leads to students achieving the respective competencies, and meet the college's standards of excellence" (College curriculum committee, 2010).

After receiving IRB approval from both the study institution as well as UCF, e-mails were sent to all of the members of the curriculum committee to make them aware of the study I

was undertaking. The handbook for the curriculum committee at the study institution spells out the membership quite clearly.

> The committee consists of twenty one members: one Associate in Arts dean, one Associate in Science dean, and nineteen tenured/tenure-track professors [one each from the following disciplines: communications, fine arts, foreign languages, health-sciences, humanities, mathematics, natural sciences, physical education, public service, business, social sciences, technical education, counselor, librarian, engineering/architecture programs, nursing, IT, one at-large member, and the Faculty Council President-Elect]. (2010)

At the time of this study, there were two seats vacant and one held by the researcher himself. This left eighteen members as possible interviews; thirteen agreed and were interviewed during the month of June, 2010.

As these initial interviews were conducted, certain categories began to emerge which suggested that others needed to be interviewed to broaden the data. Others who were critical in this study included the chief learning officer, the AVP for curriculum and articulation, and several deans who have responsibility over courses which are part of the general education program. This part of the process is identifying similar perspectives on the process in order to minimize the differences within the comparative groups (Glaser & Strauss; Conrad, 1990).

In addition to the administrators and faculty members directly involved with the curriculum committee, it also proved useful to select faculty members who teach courses that are a part of the general education program (but who do not directly participate in the curriculum committee's process of reforming the program; they are, however, potential members of the

curriculum committee or may have served in the past). Others who added a perspective were those faculty members who teach within the curriculum, but not courses that are included in the general education core. This resulted in an additional ten interviews at the study institution. This further supports the emerging theory by maximizing the differences to insure a complete theory is developed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009; Conrad, 1990).

All the interviews revolved around very open ended questions which allow the participants to reveal their own experience and understanding of general education. While the interviews were not the sole source of data, they will be the most important. The protocol for the interviews is found in appendix A. Additional data was obtained by referring to the study institution's web site. Here, one can find the college's policy manual, as well as the web site established for the curriculum committee. I also utilized the web sites for the statutes for the state guiding the college's practices as well as the web site for the state department of education and the board rules governing community colleges within this system

Procedure

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967/2009), grounded theory utilizes the constant comparative method which they characterize as having four stages: (1) comparing incidents which apply to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory. This process should not be viewed in a linear fashion, but instead as an oscillating trek through the data with each step guiding the others.

After each interview was conducted, the transcript was be examined and coded utilizing in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009) to identify key concepts; these categories led to two different

ends. First, the information given led us to others who need to be interviewed and suggested how many more people needed to be interviewed (until saturation is reached); the coding permitted the data to present the real circumstances of the study institution as well as help to guide questions in subsequent interviews. For this study, the categories included any concept which reflects the framework of general education that each individual reflects; these ranged from liberal to core, breadth to depth. Next, what emerged from this coding was the foundation and shape of the emerging theory. These patterns were brought forth by the writing of memos after each interview which attempted to narrate the connection between the categories which emerged in the interviews. These categories began to fall into patterns which reflected the properties they have in common. This emerging pattern of categories and properties also served to delimit the theory and bring the data into controllable proportions. Attempts to make the theory more complex were controlled by the data and the practices individuals describe as real for this college.

The categories which emerged in the interviews were compared to written policies and procedure in place to guide the efforts of the community college to reform and adapt general education programs, to fulfill both the needs of the students as well as the mandates in place from those responsible for the operation of higher education within the state of Florida. As categories were identified and organized, further interviews were sought until the categories were saturated (that is, new data no longer identifies new categories or variations) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009; Glaser, 1978). What emerged from the analysis of the data is a clearer understanding of the underlying theory which is guiding the discussion of, the design of, and the

reform of the general education program at the college. A visual presentation of this structure is found in figure 1.

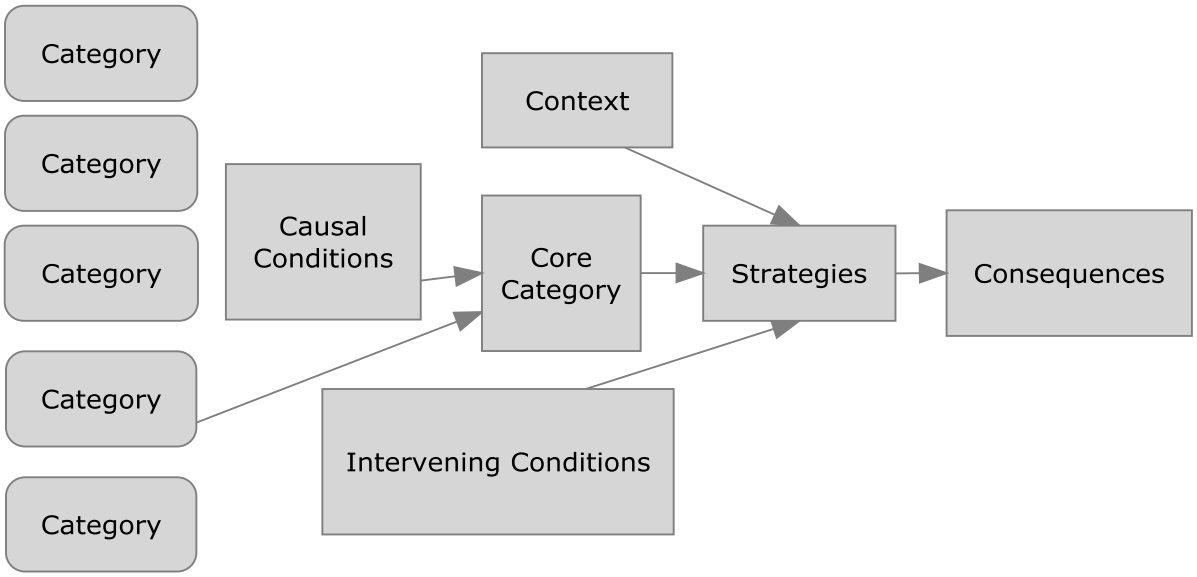

Figure 1: Grounded Theory Paradigm (Creswell, 2008)

In order to overcome any personal bias on the part of the interviewer, several reliability procedures proposed by Gibbs (as cited in Creswell, 2009) were used. These included the use of triangulation; the categories that are identified in the transcripts of the interviews will be compared with other interviews as well as the written policies and procedures. Another method utilized was member checking, in which some of those interviewed reviewed the analysis for accuracy. As the theory to emerge is from those interviewed, their ability to resonate with the final product was validating. None of the methods of validation mentioned here go against the spirit of classical grounded theory; they do, however, address some of the reservations some have about the reliability of the data collected for use in the study.

Bias statement

In my study of the historical development of the general education program in higher education in general and within the context of community colleges in particular, I have read several accounts which speak of the ill advised or poorly formed reform efforts of general education. The literature speaks to inconsistent definitions of general education, multiple if not conflicting purposes for the program, and faculty interests which are more based in discipline survival than overall curricular design. My own experience as both a faculty member and administrator in general education courses also has colored my perception of difficulties involved with designing and implementing a consistent and sound general education program. With this is mind, it becomes critical that this study approaches the data with not only open eyes, but with a fresh view as if seeing the ideas for the first time. Proper use of the methodology of grounded theory will allow the views that emerge to be those of the institution and not simply reinforcing my own perspective. Finally, as an administrator at the study institution, I avoided interviewing anyone who is a direct report for fear that their comments would be attempts to say what I wanted to hear. The others I interviewed were aware of my role at the college, but were able to speak to me as an objective observer of the processes of the college. Most were based at a different campus that the one I am at; all of them report to others over whom I have no authority other than that held by all in a collaboratively organized institution with a structure of shared governance for its organizational model.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

A grounded theory study is a qualitative approach to social phenomena, allowing the process under investigation to reveal the underlying theory guiding it in situ. Although originally developed in the context of sociological studies and often perceived to be appropriate only for sociology, grounded theory has great value in other fields including education (Piantanida, Tananis, & Grubs, 2004). For this reason, this methodology was chosen to guide the investigation of the process of reforming general education at this educational institution. The questions asked of those most directly involved with the general education program, the curriculum committee, allowed the major themes, concepts, and underlying understanding of general education to emerge. Accordingly, this chapter will be divided into two parts. The first will be a reporting out of the categories which emerged in the interview questions, including the relationship to relevant documents and theory. The second part will consist of the emerging theories from these data as the findings of this research. I will begin by reporting out the categories which emerged from the answers to each of the questions; this will allow the formulation of the theory to be more evident.

The interviews consisted of several very open ended questions with a series of sub-questions which were included to insure a thorough presentation of the various aspects of general education needed for both the study as well as the work of reforming and implementing general education as part of the curriculum. The answers given formed the basis of the theory which emerged.

Question one: "What is your understanding of general education?"

The intent was to have people speak about the idea of general education before looking at the specific implementation at the college or any other institution for that matter. Most responded in this way with a few asking specifically if I meant here at the college or in general. The most immediate pattern which emerged in the series of interviews was that every person, without exception, used the term breadth within the first two sentences describing their understanding of general education. This is entirely consistent with the understanding of general education that is found in the college's curriculum committee web site; the fifth principle guiding the placement of a course within the general education program is that it "contribute significantly to breadth of knowledge" (see Appendix D).

Table 1 Example quotes for Understanding of General Education

"general education courses are there to create a breadth of knowledge for students"
"broad based curriculum that has a breadth of knowledge to it so student can get a smattering of different disciplines to be more well rounded"
"set of skills that students need to develop before they receive their degree"
"providing the student a liberal arts foundation in areas of communication, humanities, math, psychology…I'm not sure of all the exact categories"
"general broad stroke sampling of what is available in the curriculum"

After the initial consensus that general education involved breadth of knowledge, the respondents began to follow several different paths in describing what they believed general education to be. Many spoke of the variety of courses that students would and should be exposed to as a result of the general education requirements. The variety described was discipline specific, that is, requiring the students to take courses across a range of disciplinary areas to insure that all students, regardless of their major, were exposed to subject matter outside of the students' majors. The reasons given as to why this was important varied between different

respondents. Some thought that this variety would be critical in helping a student choose a major and perhaps one that they would not have thought suitable had it not been for the general education requirement. Others felt that the requirement was critical so that the students would have a liberal education. This discussion of the need for liberal education seemed to be the underlying rationale in the minds of many of the respondents for the breadth of general education. In this way, general education prevents the education of the students from becoming too technical or narrowly constructed around a major.

Another important line of answers emerged from several of the respondents who looked to general education to achieve certain outcomes. For many, the reason for the general education requirements is to expose students to and help them develop academic skills. The skills that all referenced in their answers were reading, writing, and mathematics. This provides a slightly different perspective on general education than those who were looking for liberal education. The course work in liberal education is important for the content which enhances the person of the student; the skill set for academic success is achieved through the content of general education (in this view), but could just as easily be taught in more dedicated academic skill courses such as student success or the Master Student course. One common element of those who spoke of academic skills, however, was the idea that at the community college, these academic skills imparted in the general education program and specifically targeted for those who are transferring into a four year school. This idea of the design of the community college program based on transferability is one which will be repeated often in late responses. Another skill set that was associated with the general education requirements was civic skills (Colby, et al., 2003). The common theme was that students taking general education courses such as

government or history classes would be better informed citizens in a democratic society. This was certainly the emphasis of general education reform shortly after the Second World War with both the Harvard Red Book and the Truman Report emphasizing the need for colleges to instill democratic ideals in their graduates. The third skill that was presented as a desired reason for general education was global perspective. This was often voiced as a need for greater awareness of cultures other than our own or a more pragmatic view that the world, because of increased communication, is becoming increasingly small and our interactions with other cultures are more inevitable and necessary in a global economy.

Another property of the general education program that many respondents felt was essential was that of elective. That students are able to choose courses from a list of pre-approved courses to customize their academic plan was mentioned by many. The idea that a student should select courses that will lead to the desired outcomes based on their own interests or personal background was important. Very few of the respondents felt that a core curriculum would be advantageous in students' curriculum; the skills were what are important. Students who were musically inclined should be able to select those courses rather than a required humanities or math course. Just as it has in the history of general education, the category of variety and the category of elective create some contradictions in the application of a general education program. This is reflected in the number of respondents who also spoke of general education courses being cross-disciplinary, but not referring to them being inter-disciplinary.

One of the sub-questions in this first part of the interviews was "why does the college have a general education program" and the answers most commonly given fell into to overlapping areas. The first (and the most common first response) area is that of mandate. Few

went into specifics of by whom, but most began this answer by stating the reason for a general education program at the college is because we are required to have one. The second area addressed by the respondents was the more philosophical and spoke about the desired outcomes of the general education program. In these answers, all of the areas discussed above, from academic skills and civic awareness, to global and multicultural awareness, were restated. And for most, the reason for these outcomes was preparation for life after the college, whether that be as an employee and citizen, or (and as was indicated, more likely the case) as a student at a four year college or university. This transferability of skills achieved by a sequence of courses called the general education program caused many to speculate that a two year college might not be able to realistically achieve such lofty expectation, not might the students be developmentally prepared within their time at the two year college to engage the courses meaningfully to develop these outcomes.

Question two: "What are the requirements of the general education program?"

When asked to give the requirements of the general education program, almost every respondent cited the list of requirements as laid out in the catalog, emphasizing the number of credits required within the designated disciplines. While some were less sure of the exact number of credits in a discipline other than their own, everyone was clear that there were requirements to have courses in communications, humanities, social science, math, and science. Many included foreign languages in the list, even though the foreign language requirement is not technically a part of the general education requirement. The college catalog lists the following requirements at this college:

- Nine credits in communications, which are ENC 1101 (Comp 1), ENC 1102 (Comp 2), and SPC 1608 (Fundamentals of Speech)
- Nine credits in humanities, which include three credits in a non-writing course from a distribution list (twenty courses to elect from), three credits of a writing course (Gordon Rule) with an HUM prefix (sixteen to elect from), and an addition three credits from the HUM writing list or from the non-HUM prefix list (twenty to elect from)
- Six credits in mathematics (twenty-one courses to elect from)
- Six credits in science (fifty courses to elect from)
- Six credits in social science, which includes POS 2041 (U.S. Government) and three credits from a list (twenty-one to elect from)

Once the respondents were able to feel that the mandated requirements of general education were addressed, the discussions turned to more of the underlying rationale for these courses. Many spoke of the breadth of knowledge component of general education, while other emphasized variety and a spectrum of courses (with a nod toward the elective dimension of the students' curricular plan). While some also returned to the element of transferability and the importance of the courses being commonly accepted at other institutions, all turned the discussion to the learning outcomes that are a part of the college's stated understanding of general education (see Figure 2). Everyone saw these outcomes as the basis for the breadth of courses that are employed within the general education program. These form the basis upon which courses are added to the curriculum for addition to the general education program, the

structure upon which assessment of general education is built, as well as the rationale for the deletion of current curses in the program which may no longer be appropriate.

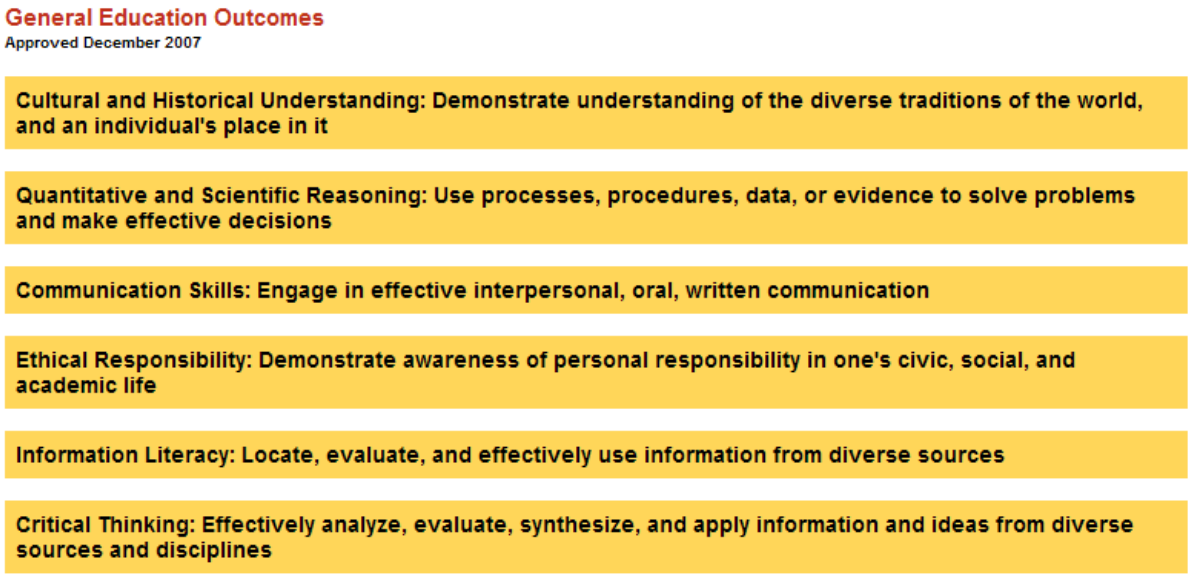

Figure 2: Outcomes found on Curriculum Committee website.

Reprinted from College Curriculum Committee Website, 2010, Retrieved from http://valenciacc.edu/curriculumcommittee/GeneralEducation.cfm. Reprinted with permission.

There were two parallel sub-questions to this question which asked of the strengths and weaknesses of the current program of general education at the college. When speaking of the strengths, two categories were repeated by most of the respondents. First, most spoke of how well-rounded the current structure of the general education program is. For this, they were mostly referring to the range of course disciplines which were represented in the distribution model. Second, nearly everyone, especially the current members of the curriculum committee, spoke of the value of the guidelines (see Appendix D) now in place for adding new courses to the general education program. Many spoke with regret of some of the courses which had been

included in the list of courses for general education, but long since removed because of the new criteria, one which gives a more intentional look at the purpose of general education.

When speaking of the weakness of the program, many began by referring to the pet courses of faculty from the past which found their way into general education in hopes that students would take them. These courses (removed by the new guidelines) were placed on the list of general education courses (and into the curriculum in general) based entirely on the interest and background of one instructor. They were generally offered only by that one faculty member at one campus and were dropped from the curriculum (in the past) when the faculty member left the college. Of greater concern to many of the respondents, however, was the number of courses students had to select from for their general education requirements. They saw this as a matter of convenience rather than of sound curricular design; it was not clear whether this convenience favored the students in their selection of courses or the faculty in the variety of courses they might offer. The greatest concern about the current program of general education at the college was the difference in requirements and courses to fulfill those requirements between those students pursuing an Associate of Arts degree and those pursuing an Associate of Science degree. When they spoke of general education in a more abstract manner, they could see absolutely no reason at all for a difference in the requirements or the courses to fulfill those requirements. When, however, they spoke of the mandated requirements and expressed purpose of the Associate of Science programs, they were more sympathetic to a difference in the number of courses required, but still not in terms of the courses that would fulfill those requirements.

Another set of sub-questions were asked in this area to establish what the respondents' personal involvement in general education was. First, all were asked if they teach (or have

taught) courses in the general education program. In this study, the mix was nearly fifty-fifty, with a slightly higher number of respondents (seventeen of the thirty) haven taught general education courses. One characteristic that was prevalent was those who do not teach in the general education program tended to be more apologetic about their understanding of the requirements and history of general education. Those who do teach in general education spoke with greater confidence. Neither group, however, felt that there should be any difference between the requirements for students in the Associate of Arts and Associate of Science degrees. Those who teach general education courses also felt, in general, that the way the course is taught is not different because of the courses inclusion in general education. The underlying assumption is that the course was chosen because it will lead to the desired outcomes, not that it is taught to do so.

Question three: "How do changes occur in general education here at the college?"

The truly surprising part of the interviews occurred when the third question was asked. Most immediately identified the curriculum committee as the locus of change for the general education program. When pressed on the initiators of the changes that are brought to the curriculum committee, the answers became both widely varied and very specific. Some stated that the changes that come to the curriculum committee to make to the general education program start with the faculty, but the vast majority of those who answered made it very clear that the source of change to general education comes from either outside the college (mandates from either the state legislators or the regional accreditation agency) or from the administration of the college (and usually to move the college into compliance with a change in accreditation or

legal requirements). This led one person to suggest that the curriculum committee was actually more of a delta committee, charged with implementing changes rather than guiding them. When considering why changes are suggested by either external agencies or by the college administration, most suggested that the motivation was economic or political. All saw the value of the community college in responding to the workforce needs of the local community and its ability to adapt its educational programs based on the current needs. For this reason, many held the view that the curriculum in general and general education in particular were often shaped because of the needs of the local work force. Another oft cited external force influencing curricular change was transferability of credit, or in other words, other institutions of higher education and especially the local university to which the majority of the community college graduates will attend. Because of this, the faculty on the curriculum committee felt that it was important to include or exclude a course from general education if it would make the students' transfer to the university more seamless. The underlying assumption here is that the university has a rationale for the inclusion or exclusion of courses from general education; the community college would serve its students better by conforming to that curriculum.

The sub-questions in this area asked about successful and unsuccessful reforms to general education at the college. In terms of success, those who cited anything (as many did not) referenced the addition of the criteria for adding or deleting courses from general education (Appendix D) as well as the deletion of courses from the list of general education courses offered because they were deemed no longer appropriate. Two reasons were given for the deletions. Either a course was a pet course from a faculty member which was added before the addition criteria was adopted or a course was deemed too specific or work force related (and thus a

violation of the accreditation body's guidelines for appropriate courses in general education). Most respondents could not recall any successful reforms to general education because their impression was that it is what it is and has been as such for as long as they could remember. This was also reflected in the lack of answers given to the unsuccessful attempts to reform general education. Only two of those interviewed mentioned a summit that was held at the college approximately two years ago to consider the possibility of redesigning the structure of general education. This initiative created quite a stir at the college (especially among the faculty who teach courses in general education) ; the meeting was very well attended with heated debate and politically charged rhetoric carrying the day. In the end, no changes were made to the course within general education or to the structure of the program, but there was a significant amount of momentum created to facilitate further discussion of general education.

Question four: What was your experience of general education in your undergraduate program?"

When the discussion changed directions with this fourth question, the mood of those interviewed also changed noticeably. As the respondents recalled their own experience of the curriculum as undergraduates and especially general education, they all told of a very positive experience. The examples of valuable insights gained and perspectives broadened by courses that otherwise would not have been taken were quite universal. Many spoke of the general education courses leading them to choose their major, one not envisioned at the beginning of the undergraduate career. Others spoke of the value of exposure to non-major courses, even if those courses had, as most students would observe, nothing to do with my major or my intended occupation. Others saw these courses as invaluable building blocks leading to a well rounded

education or as the vital elements of liberal education essential for a baccalaureate degree. What was abundantly clear from most of the reflections is that general education was (and thus should continue to be) an important part of the curriculum which added important elements to the curriculum (even if what in included in those elements is not clear or how those outcomes are achieved with the current structure is equally vague).

When asked to reflect on their impression of the courses while they were undergraduates, two options appeared most regularly. First, many stated that they were not aware that certain courses were part of general education or that there was a general education requirement at all. They were aware that for their degree, they were required to take a certain number of courses and several of these fell outside of the discipline of their major. Second, many recalled the typical student response of dreading taking courses outside their major (for fear of losing points in their grade point average because they were not good at that other discipline) or because of the time and expense of taking courses not needed for the students' future employment. They reluctantly admitted that they took the courses to "get them out of the way" in much the same way today's students at the college sometimes do. Thus, despite the fact that they were not clear about the role the courses played in their own undergraduate career, they are certain it was important and important enough to continue to include for today's students.

Question Five: "Was there something I should have asked that I did not?"

This final question was included to insure that my views on general education, its importance, and its reform at this college were not the guiding features of the emergent theory or the overall understanding of general education. Few offered any comments to this question;

those who did wondered if I had considered the views of students in this study. I had not, not because their experience is not important, but because at present their voice is not a part of the development or reform of the overall curriculum. Their feedback to faculty about individual courses is invaluable in keeping the presentation of the curriculum (in specific courses offered) vital and appropriate, but does not impact the overall curriculum design of the degree programs. This did lead to an interesting discussion about faculty members' involvement in the curriculum and specifically the oft heard expression at this (and other) college: the curriculum belongs to the faculty. One person in particular felt that it was important to note that this refers most appropriately to curriculum at the classroom level, and should not be mistaken to hold that the overall shape and design of the curriculum should be shaped by a committee of faculty members from different disciplines and no position of looking at the big picture of curriculum design.

Coding

As the interviews and other documents were collected and examined, it was necessary to apply the methodology of grounded theory to the data in order to arrive at categories which would provide the foundation for the emerging theory. This process allows guiding categories of thought to emerge from the responses of those interviewed and to identify the foundational concepts of the theory guiding the understanding and process of reforming general education. The presence of these categories both inform the emerging theory and guide the ongoing interview process; once no new categories emerge, further interviews are conducted simply to confirm that these categories are the principal categories of thought for this institution. The categories that emerged were found in exemplar quotes listed in table 1. The resulting categories

are reflected and summarized in table 2 along with example of what these categories imply for the development of a general education curriculum.

Table 2 Example quotes from interviews as they reflect emerging categories

Citizenship
"a broad cognitive sort of framework for students to learn their critical thinking skills necessary to be successful as students and in life" "learn the values necessary to live in a democratic society"
Life skills
"have a variety of conversations about different things" "general education should help students do the things they want to do when they graduate" "one of the outcomes should be strong interpersonal communication"
Variety
"there's a variety of courses to choose from so students are not buttonholed into one or two courses…that's a strength" "the general education courses did broaden my knowledge, but I would not have chosen to take them" "it introduces students to different disciplines to give them a more well rounded education"
Breadth
"we have this mandate from the state to have this general education program that is to broaden their learning" "broad based curriculum that has a breadth of knowledge to it so student can get a smattering of different disciplines to be more well rounded"
Academic preparedness
"if you stay just inside your own area that you're interested in, you miss out. I really think general education is an asset in moving beyond a limited major perspective." "students need to know scientific reasoning and applied math skills to succeed in upper level courses"
Transferability
"we're transitioning our students from the community college to the four year universities so they should have the same general education requirements. It would make life easier for everyone."

Table 3 Open Coding of General Education Interviews

Category	Properties	Examples
Citizenship	Civic responsibilities	government courses
	Cultural awareness/sensitivity	western civilization courses
		non-western courses
Life Skills	Personal improvement	social interaction
		civility
		inter-personal communication
	Employability	work force skills
		interview and resume writing
	Technical skills	discipline certifications
Variety	Convenience curriculum	student designed educational plan
	Freedom of course election	requirements satisfied through personal interest courses
	Selection of major	exposure to multiple disciplines
Breadth	Discipline based	discipline experts teaching fundamental discipline specific methodologies
	Liberal arts	core educational knowledge assumed course exposure for undergraduate degree
	Cross-disciplinary	gen education skills transcend single discipline
Academic Preparedness	Critical thinking	sound argumentation
		ability to draw valid conclusions
		critical discernment of research sources
	Writing skills	clear communication of ideas
		composition classes
	Math skills	quantitative reasoning
	Preparation for upper division course work	research skills
	Preparation for advanced courses within major	discipline based skills
Transferability	mandates from state and accrediting agencies	compliance with board rules and accreditation requirements
	Articulation agreements	designed educational plans for students transition from cc to upper division
	Alignment with transfer institutions/university	formal acceptance of university curriculum by cc

Generating Theory

Having conducted several interviews with those directly involved with the process of reforming general education at the college as well as those who also have a voice in the changes in the curriculum, having reviewed the documents of the college concerning the curriculum and the policies and procedures for reforming that curriculum, and considering the history and background to the current state of affairs in higher education in the United States, it is now time to examine what theory is emerging from the data. This is most clearly seen by answering the research question posed earlier in this work.

The research question is: What is the underlying theory which guides the process of formulating, reforming, and implementing the general education program at a community college? Even in the formulation of that question early on in this study, I appreciated that one of the most important considerations was going to be the underlying theory of general education which guided the faculty or at least the definition of general education held by the institution and its relationship to the college's mission. What I had read about general education reform led me to suspect that there was going to be a disparity between the view of faculty and administrators about the role of discipline specific courses and their relationship to the desired outcomes of general education. Instead, I found that there was a very consistent view of all those who responded about their understanding of general education and the need for it in the curriculum. Unexpectedly though, I did find there were two theories at work at the college, and the disparity which hinders an effective change in general education reform is between theory and practice. The memos that were written after each of the interviews very quickly revealed two very distinct and divergent theories in operation at the college. These can most clearly be seen by organizing

the data form questions one and four together on the one hand, and combining the data from questions two and three on the other.

Theory 1: General Education Considered Abstractly

As the respondents gave their answers to questions one and four, they were generally referring to a theoretical idea of general education. They spoke of high ideals and important values of liberal education critical for any college education. The core category which provides the foundation of the theory was clearly breadth of knowledge (see Figure 3). The history of higher education, at least from the personal perspective of the respondents, seems to justify the assumption made that the supporting rationale for general education in the curriculum is to provide for the requirements of a liberal education. These required courses offset the trend toward over specialization in academic majors or a move toward vocationalism in the curriculum.

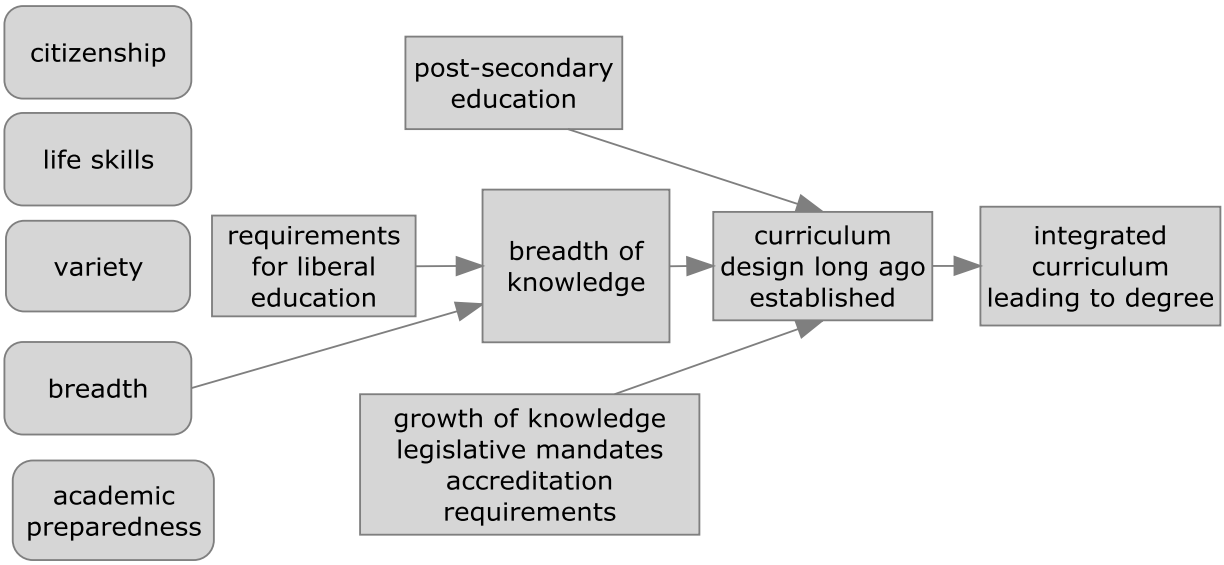

Figure 3 General Education: Understood Abstractly

In terms of the context for this general education curriculum, the community college is as valid a place for this to occur as is a four year college or university. Even within the community college, the respondents made it quite clear that even if a student was pursuing an Associate of Arts or an Associate of Science degree, the same requirements, courses, and desired outcomes of general education apply. There is, however, the clear understanding that both the community college and university are subject to the guidelines and principles put forward by the regional accreditation body, as well as rules put forth by the state board of education and the state legislature. What is also clear is that these guidelines continue to reinforce and validate the long standing curriculum of general education which today's faculty members experienced as undergraduates; the strategy to achieve the desired liberal education goals of general education is fidelity to the long established curriculum of elective courses over a distribution of appropriate disciplines. This will lead to an integrated curriculum for those who successfully complete the

degree path at the institution. What was not expressed by the respondents is the way in which these different courses, selected by different students, would lead to the same desired (and required) outcomes of the general education program. There was a very clear, unspoken assumption that the curriculum has worked in the past and will continue to do so.

Theory 2: General Education Considered Practically

When the discussion shifted from an understanding of general education in general to the specifics of the program here at the college, there was also a significant shift in the categories and the understanding that shaped the theory of change and reform. This caused a very different theory to emerge from the data related to reform of the general education program at the college. Many of the same categories that arose when discussing general education in the abstract presented themselves when the questions revolved around the actual program of general education at the college, but what was very clear is that the foundational category could be named compliance (to rules and external norms), but was expressed as a student centered issue: transferability (see Figure 4). All the respondents were quite concerned that the program of general education here at the community college would serve the students in their next institution of higher learning. In this way, many respondents felt that the vast majority of the students at the community college are only looking to begin their undergraduate education here. Much of what is expected in the undergraduate degree is to be acquired at the transfer institution. Thus, the general education requirements should align with those of the transfer school; unfortunately, there are so many schools to which the students transfer and no common set of agreed upon requirements or common courses to fulfill those requirements. This sense that students are not

going to complete here at the community college also led many to wonder if general education should be placed entirely within the first two years of the undergraduate experience.

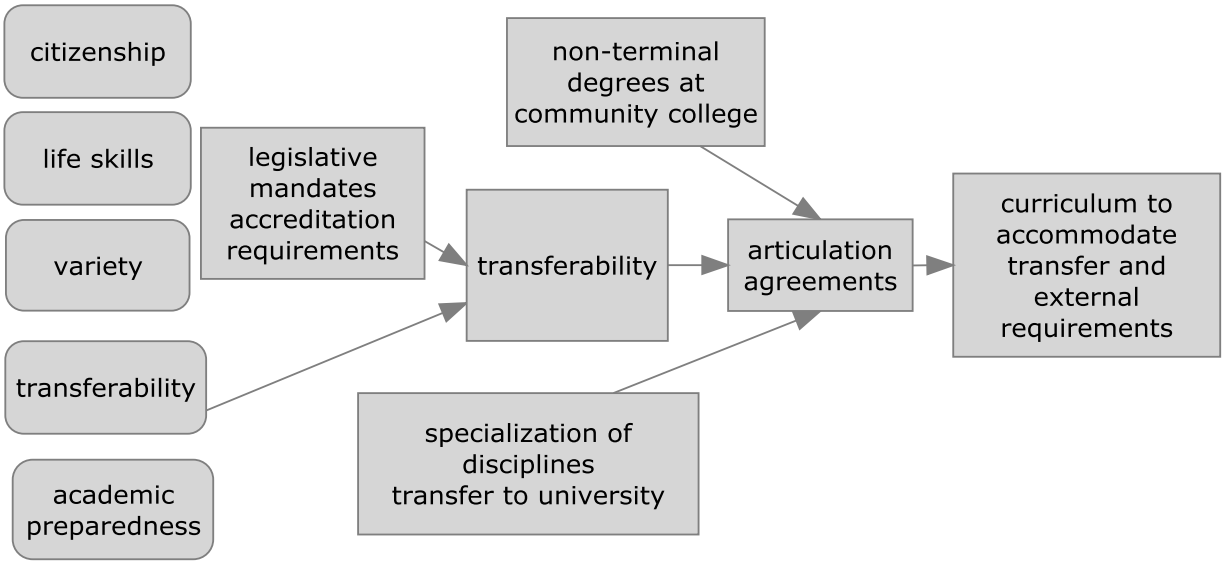

Figure 4 General Education: Understood Practically

With transferability as the core category, what theory supports the understanding of reform of general education at this college? The context for reform is that the degrees earned at the community college are not terminal, but instead are designed to be the foundation for work to be completed at the next institution. Since transfer is the goal, detailed curriculum plans are developed to address the various requirements of the legion of programs covering a full range of discipline based specializations. The only things that would cause the college to make adjustments to the general education program is first, a change in the rules of either the accreditation body or the state board of education, or second, a change in the requirements at the transfer institution. Thus, the college spends much of its time planning its curriculum to accommodate articulation agreements with particular institutions within specific academic programs so that students will be able to transition smoothly and with no need to repeat any

courses taken at the community college. What this leads to is a curriculum designed on the assumption that the desired outcomes of the general education program are clearly developed and intentional at the transfer institutions; the compliance of the community college with this curriculum assures the desired outcomes of the external authorities as well as the transition for the students.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

The curriculum of higher education in the United States has evolved and changed over the past centuries to address the various needs of society and to meet students at their developmental level. With ever changing understandings of the mission of higher education, specialization within the disciplines and faculty members, and ongoing attempts to regulate the quality and delivery of higher education, general education has emerged as a component of the curriculum utilized to give shape and direction to the curriculum (Biesi, 1982; Wehlburg, 2010). Yet, for all the efforts to have general education provide the correction that the curriculum needed, it has generated years of studies showing how general education reform has not only failed, but also contributed to the confusion and lack of integrity in the curriculum. Adding to this situation is the emergence of community colleges within the system of higher education and their own ongoing adaptation to educational and social requirements.

In reviewing the literature and history of general education in the United Sates, several things have become clear. First, general education was not developed or intended to become a standalone part of the curriculum (Dressel and Mayhew, 1954; Abrahamson and Kimsey, 2002). Instead, it was an attempt to take what was once a single curriculum and identify those elements which were essential, regardless of the academic specialization that was creeping into higher education. Whether a student planned to become an accountant or a physicist, a teacher or a lawyer, there were certain elements of learning that any college graduate should have. Very quickly, however, general education became a part of the curriculum viewed to have its own intrinsic value and outcomes independent of the baccalaureate curriculum. Since the original intent of general education seems to have been lost, it also becomes clear that the attempts to

reform it are doomed to be as effective as the understanding of general education is articulated by the reformers. Too often, it seems as if the reform efforts began with the fundamental assumption that everyone meant the same thing when speaking of general education; more often than not, people identified those elements of general education that addressed what they saw as the deficiency in the curriculum that needed addressing. This also led to the proliferation of studies which chronicle the various approaches to reform (elective realignment, move to a core, shift in distribution allotments, etc.) and the number of institutions which have employed these approaches.

It was for this reason that grounded theory was chosen as the methodology for this study at one institution. No new information would be gained by recounting the various approaches the institution has taken to reform its general education; nor would it be productive to see how well the stated outcomes of general education are being assessed. Instead, this study hoped to find the underlying rationale for general education that guides the work of the members of the institution and the working understanding of that process.

A series of interviews were scheduled with a set of questions which would allow respondents the opportunity to share a perspective not only on the understanding of general education which guided their thinking, but also their perspective on how that program was implemented and reformed here at the college. While a few of the interviews lasted for thirty minutes, the average length of each interview was closer to fifty minutes as people seemed quite at ease with the format and the topics. The greatest hesitation in the interviews seemed to come from some of the respondents who, because of their background (faculty who teach non-general

education technical courses within an Associate of Science degree program), professed to be less aware of general education as a program.

Research question, part 1: What is the underlying understanding of general education?

As the respondents spoke of general education in the abstract, a very clear understanding of general education emerged. First and foremost, general education is a critical part of the curriculum which adds breadth to the students' experience. This is in accord with the requirements as set forth in Comprehensive Standards in the Principles of Accreditation of the Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (2.7.3) which states that every undergraduate degree program within a regionally accredited school will have a general education program that is a substantial part of the degree, ensures breadth of knowledge, and is based on a coherent rationale. The college's catalog, however, defines general education as the part of the students' educational growth which provides a basic liberal arts education. While this is not necessarily contradictory, it is also not the case that these elements are harmonious. Buller (2009) speaks of a new vision of general education which is more than a series of introductory courses students endure to get to their majors. This is what seems to be implied, or at least understood, by the respondents at the college. There is a very positive, optimistic view that students who complete the general education program as laid out in the catalog will have achieved a breadth of knowledge which will transcend the disciplinary peculiarities and blend into an interdisciplinary, general view of basic undergraduate knowledge. How the current structure will achieve this is not clear; that it does achieve this is firmly believed.

Research question, part 2: What is the understanding of reforming general education?

When the questions turned to the topic of reforming the general education program at the college, a very different focus emerged, one far less positive and certainly less idealistic. This could be a reflection of Gaff's (2003) observation that working in general education is "a struggle against original sin." By this, he means that the unspoken assumptions about general education (he actually speaks of academic pride) are at work while we attempt to develop a meaningful curriculum for the students. This can prevent the efforts to reform the general education curriculum from being meaningful, or even effective.

As the respondents spoke of making changes to general education, the priority of compliance permeated the discussion. The guidelines which come from the state (a provider of substantial funding for the college) as well as the perceived expectations from the accreditation body (SACS) led most respondents to express their willingness to accommodate the changes in the curriculum to stay within these expectations from external agencies. There still remains a basic faith that staying within the recommendations for the structure of general education will lead to a program that delivers the expressed outcomes of general education. This confidence was seen in a study conducted by Henn and Witt (1998) when they examined attempts by both accreditation bodies and legislators to mandate reviews of general education in an attempt to standardize its implementation in Florida. The results of these legislative efforts were evident: the requirements for the Associate of Arts degree were more uniform, but "each college developed its own version of general education" (p. 32). Henn and Witt were looking specifically at the community colleges within the state; their study goes on to claim that not only have the community colleges developed very different general education programs, they have

also developed very different Associate of Arts degrees. The issue of transferability is negatively impacted even between community colleges within the same system. Making accommodations to the general education curriculum for transferability to the university creates an entirely different set of issues, especially if they too were mandated by the legislature or accrediting body.

Issues Identified

This study began within the context of decades of reform effort to the general education programs of institutions of higher learning and the countless studies which have shown them to be ineffective. Grounded theory methodology was thus used to allow the underlying philosophical and operational assumptions to emerge with the hope of identifying stumbling blocks to a successful reform at this particular institution. Given what has emerged, the following issues need consideration as a solution is sought.

- The role of general education within the curriculum is seen by the members of this institution to provide breadth to the educational experience of the students. The issue of breadth has had many manifestations in the history of general education ranging from a series of introductory courses to expose students to a range of disciplines to a liberal education base. Coming to a common agreement on what is intended would move reform in a positive direction.
- There is a fundamental trust in the mandates from legislation and accrediting agencies (and an overestimation of how prescriptive these are) that conformity will lead to the intended outcomes. The institution needs to be willing to consider

a different paradigm for the delivery of general education, especially after coming to a consensus on the intended purpose and outcomes.

- Those teaching courses within the general education program do so from a discipline specific perspective (as is evidenced by the number of responses indicating that the courses are not taught differently because they are a part of general education). The most recent Harvard report emphasizes what should distinguish a general education courses is that it specifically is taught with an eye on the general education outcomes, not on disciplinary based content (Menand, 2007, p.8).
- While it is important to look to other institutions to examine their programs, it is not helpful to think that there is a program which can be imported as a unit that will in turn be effective (Gaff, 1980). There are elements of the programs and components of the reform that can be utilized. Higginbottom (1995) summarized several of these elements as identified by the Project on Strong Foundations participants in 1994 and included having clear aims which embody the institutional mission, coherence, attentiveness to students' experiences, as well as incorporating both cross- and co- curricular elements.

Implications for Practice

Ratcliff (2004) notes that the changes that occurred as a result of the studies conducted between 1984 and 1994 (cf. Appendix E) certainly changed the face and approach to general education in many institutions. Nonetheless, the findings of subsequent studies continue to find

that general education is in need of transformation. He goes on to suggest that the way changes occur has and must change in the twenty-first century. This is certainly the case and the shift toward outcome based reforms is prevalent within higher education. What this study would suggest, however, is that regardless of the method of change put forward, until there is a frank and open discussion of what general education is and what role it plays within the overall curriculum, general education reform will continue to produce models and outcomes that fail to achieve the stated outcomes.

The faculty and administrators at the study institution are well intentioned, committed professionals whose desire to provide the highest quality education for the students entrusted to them is consistent with the overall mission of community college in general. What will continue to occur, unfortunately, in efforts to reform the curriculum is a fragmented curriculum caused by the discontinuity between the stated outcomes of the general education program and the operational understanding held by those making the changes and teaching the courses. It is common to see faculty within a particular discipline adapting their course outlines to conform to new mandated objectives without making any significant changes in the way the course is taught. This is the result of not seeing a different understanding of general education in the faculty members' perception and the understanding implicit in the mandates. Compliance with the external mandates does not lead to a consistent nor integrated curriculum (Henn & Witt, 1998). This calls into question the integrity and intentionality of the requirements from external mandates. There seems to be an unquestioning assumption that the requirements of the accrediting agency, for example, applied literally (certain number of courses in certain disciplines) will lead to an integrated curriculum for the students. The application of a grounded

theory study like this one to the accrediting agency would be significant is aligning the assumptions and understanding of general education as a part of the curriculum.

Future Studies

As a grounded theory study, this discussion does not intend to lead to any results which can then be generalized to other institutions. It does, however, provide valuable information which can be used by the study institution to move forward in its own efforts to reform general education. Among the other studies which should follow this one, I would include:

- A grounded theory study (similar to this one) conducted at the university which is the major transfer institution for the community college's graduates. This could lead to a more intentional design of general education and a meaningful alignment of the requirements for educational rather than political reasons.
- A system-wide study of the understanding of general education programs of the state colleges in Florida (formerly the community college system).
- An investigation of institutions (nationally) who have a director or dean of general education; do such positions exists and if so, how effective have they been in creating an integrated curriculum at their institutions? This would address the issue that general education is often perceived to be a dumping ground for concerns that no one has responsibility for (McGrath & Spear, 1991).

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

Several years ago in a graduate class in Education, a faculty member (who was not educated in the United States) asked me why there were general education requirements in the undergraduate programs. As someone who both received this education (as a philosophy major) and has been involved in its delivery (as a humanities professor), I was stunned and embarrassed not to have a ready answer. This led me to begin the investigation that brought me to this study. Before I could raise the question of the study, however, I had to situate the emergence and role of general education within the curriculum of higher education in the United States.

Curriculum in Higher Education

When higher education first made is appearance on the shores of the newly founded colonies, it, much like much of the life here, was imported from England. When Harvard opened its doors in 1636, the expectations were exactly the same as if the students were enrolled at Emmanuel College at Cambridge (Cohen, 1998) and the goal of the new institution was also the same: to indoctrinate students in the seven liberal arts so that they might be well groomed gentlemen. Basic education was taught in secondary schools and skills needed for professions would be achieved through apprenticeships. This education was not for everyone and only those from aristocratic backgrounds would even be considered for such an education. There was no general education program at this time; there was one curriculum that everyone took.

Over the next one hundred and fifty years, two major factors impacted to role of higher education in the United States. First, the emerging sense of nationalism in the colonies and the resistance to an old world view favoring the aristocratic as somehow deserving of privilege

which comes from education created a greater sense that education could be a place wherein anyone who works hard enough can reap the benefits. This shift from an aristocratic view of education to a more meritocratic position came as a second factor impacted the role of higher education: the emergence of the German research model of higher education and greater specialization within the disciplines, especially those fueled by the Scientific Revolution (Bastedo, 2005). There was a fundamental move away from a single curriculum at the university to a model of multiple specializations based upon the work of faculty within one discipline who then viewed the university as a place to both conduct their research and prepare future students to do the same within their specialization. The classical curriculum of liberal studies was no longer meeting the needs of the American students or society.

As institutions struggled with this newly emerging diversity of studies, the tension could be felt between those who felt that the classical curriculum was still the only curriculum worthy of higher education (cf. Yale Report of 1828) and other like Brown which moved to a more diverse curriculum with electives so that students could shape the curriculum to meet their specific needs. This elective model also made a major impact on the curriculum at Harvard when adopted by Eliot and spread quickly throughout the institutions in the United States. What also spread with equal speed however was the concern that the elective model created substantial gaps in the learning of graduates. Again Harvard would be at the forefront of the reform when, in 1909, Lovell introduced a distribution model to insure that certain areas were not neglected in a student's course of studies.

This solution to the conflict between those who held to a classical curriculum and those who looked for more freedom for the students did not satisfy everyone and the next major

curricular innovation came from the University of Chicago and Robert Hutchins who proposed that general education should elevate the common man through exposure to the classics. This ultimately led to the Great Books movement and the reform efforts of Harvard once again in 1945 with the publication of the Red Book. What has emerged at this point is not only a divergence on what should be taught, but also the desired outcomes of the curriculum. While the classicists might argue that the character of the student is what is being developed, others look to specific academic skills that should be nurtured in the undergraduate as a result of general education. Others still argue for more of a core curriculum in which specific content is required of the students in order to have an undergraduate education. Others, in the post-World War II environment would have the liberal focus of the classicist curriculum focus more specifically on instilling democratic ideals. Whatever the focus, however, it is clear that what has emerged as general education did so as a result of educational leaders seeing a deficiency that needed correcting in the curriculum. What has happened over the centuries, however, is an adoption of the corrections into the canon of the curriculum, even when the problem to be solved is the earlier solution.

Community colleges as a complication

If the curriculum has developed to adapt to the ever changing mission of the university, the introduction of the community college has added a new wrinkle to the ongoing emergence of general education. Thought to be the institutional offspring of William Rainey Harper at the University of Chicago, the original junior colleges were also an attempt to address the concerns of those in higher education. Sensing a lack of preparation out of the secondary schools, Harper

proposed a two year track for those who were capable of the work, but perhaps not university bound (Erdman & Ogden, 2000). From these humble beginnings, systems of community colleges arose throughout the country and each did so to address the needs of the local community. Thus, these community colleges were able to address the needs of the local workforce with greater flexibility than their more firmly established four year counterparts. What cannot be denied, however, is that the flexibility with which these systems could adapt also contributes to the multiplicity of missions and perceived roles in higher education.

Looking specifically at the state of Florida, the community college system is relatively young, begun in 1947, and has grown into a system encompassing twenty-eight colleges. While there has been a single system, there has been an ongoing shift in both the governance and oversight of these colleges (Henn & Witt, 1998) which in turn has led to multiple views of the mission of the community colleges and the role of the curriculum in their mission. This is further complicated when in state legislation enacted in 2008, the community college system was renamed the state college system, a shift not merely in nomenclature, but also a shift in responsibility for now the state colleges may apply for and grant four year baccalaureate degrees. Whether or not the community colleges should even be in the business of general education now becomes even less clear (compare Thornton, 1966 and Harlacher, 1982).

The Study

With these issues compounding the ongoing issue of general education reform which at any given moment may be seen to be an idea in distress (Carnegie, 1977), I proposed a very specific study at one community college in the state of Florida to see if there was any clarity in

the efforts of general education reform. It was to be a grounded theory study (Glaser, 1992) to allow the data to reveal what the underlying understanding of general education is operationally at the institution and compare that to the expressed efforts to implement and reform general education. Once IRB approval was received by, I began with a series of interviews. The first interviews were with the members of the Curriculum Committee who are charged with the responsibility of overseeing the curriculum at this community college. The membership of the committee is diverse and representative of the various disciplines and programs offered at the college. The members represent not only the different disciplines such as Communications, Foreign Languages, Allied Health, and others, but also insure that the Associate of Arts and Associate of Science degrees have a voice in the discussion. These first thirteen (those who agreed to participate) interviews were conducted over a period of two weeks and each interview was immediately followed up with a coding and memo writing exercise. The coding (Saldaña, 2009) was done as a critical part of grounded theory to allow the categories which support the views expressed in the interview to emerge. A memo was then written to suggest the connections supporting the categories, properties, and processes expressed in the interviews.

As the interviews continued, there was pattern which began to emerge which suggested a divergence in the views of general education when spoken of in general and when the particular program at this college was addressed. To support this, more interviews were conducted with various members of the administration as, as well as with additional faculty members who were not serving on the Curriculum Committee at this time, but could in the future. They also represented teaching faculty who were teaching courses in the general education program and those who were not. This brought the total number of interviews to thirty in an effort to reach

what is known as theoretical saturation, the point at which it is clear that no additional data will be found to develop a category further. The categories that emerged from the interviews were also compared to and incorporated into official documents such as the college catalog, the information from the curriculum committee's web site, as well as accreditation agency's documentation and other relevant policy statements.

Two very clear and distinct theories of general education emerged from these interviews. When those interviewed were talking about general education in the abstract, whether as a broadly understood part of all undergraduate curricula or their own personal experience of general education as an undergraduate, they understood it to be a critical part of a liberal education that provides a breadth to the curriculum that is essential for the undergraduate experience. This foundation was seen as important for community college students whether they were going to transfer to the university or move directly into the work force. In either case, the knowledge and skill engendered by general education were seen as vital.

When the discussion turned to the specific process of implementing, changing, or reforming general education at this particular institution, however, the central focus became very different. While the ideals of liberal education and a breadth of knowledge were still present, the central focus of the discussion now was compliance with external requirements and transferability. Any course addition or modification was seen to be mandated either by a change in policy from the state board of education or from an accrediting agency or to help a student's transfer plan to the university become more seamless. What is perhaps most disturbing about this central guiding category is that it makes a very large assumption that the university and/or the policy makers have designed their modifications with a clear understanding of what the

general education component of the curriculum is to achieve. Years of studies concerning the reform of general education would suggest that this assumption is naive at best.

Conclusions

The design of this study was deliberately narrow and focused on one institution for it appears that regardless of external policies and guidelines, the work of curriculum design is done at the institutional level and brings with it the unique understandings, interpretations, and history of the institution (Henn & Witt, 1998). It can still be the source of further studies in the questions that have been raised and some conclusions that can be drawn about the current process of curriculum reform at the institution.

The implementation of general education at an institution is quite complex because there are several historically valid and competing understandings of what general education is. One can even wonder if it will ever be the case that general education is no longer seen as a standalone component in the curriculum, but instead as a dimension of the curriculum developed for undergraduate students in general. As an independent program of study, it should have clear expectations and outcomes and a dedicated staff of faculty members who intentionally teach to these aims. As it stands now, faculty members from different disciplines teach their own course as a part of general education with the assumption that the accumulation of these several courses will lead to a coherent curriculum with clearly defines outcomes. This issue of coherence and integration of the courses across disciplines needs be addressed.

The discussion of what general education is and what it should achieve in the curriculum is one which need take place outside the consideration of what courses are required or how the

program of study will be designed. This institution, as have countless before, found itself shifting focus when the discussion came to making radical reforms in the structure of the program with appeals made to external requirements and with little regard for overall goals and outcomes for the students. All faculty members understand how important their own discipline is; it becomes increasingly more difficult to discuss how others have a value if job security is a specter looming in the background (even if it is not true). What is interesting at this particular institution is that there is a well established (over thirty years) interdisciplinary studies program which was designed as a general education curriculum and is listed in the college catalog as a valid way to fulfill general education. On rare occasion, it is mentioned, but is always quickly relegated to the corner of unique, highly specialized, and not scalable to the entire student body (it is currently part of the Honors program, although it was not originally designed as such). This program does not come into the discussion about general education even though its success over the years bears consideration.

The shift in the mission of the community college within the state also requires this institution to examine its mission and how that mission can be best served in the curriculum. It is not clear whether general education (as defined by statute or policy) can be achieved within thirty-six credit hours taken from a grocery list of dozens of courses with no supporting cross disciplinary integration. It is clear from the responses of those interviewed for this study that there is a believe that general education is vital, can be achieved within the curriculum, and should be the same for students pursuing an Associate of Arts, and Associate of Science, or a baccalaureate degree. If this is the case, the curriculum should be designed at any level and be transferable to any other institution. This all presumes a wider discussion and consensus

between multiple institutions. Otherwise, the community college (or state college) will be identified as the hand maiden to the four year colleges and universities, building its curriculum based on those "higher" needs. If this is to be the case, the consensus must still be reached between universities of the role and expectations of general education.

Finally, this study has certainly opened my eyes to the single greatest obstacle to the development and reform of general education: the assumption that everyone knows what they mean when they say general education and that everyone means the same thing. Until we are able to have a frank and candid discussion about general education, the studies of the next fifty years will continue the same patterns of the last fifty: general education is in a state of disarray and we need to continue to improve it (even if we do not know what it is). The approach of grounded theory can brings a new perspective to institutions initiating change within their curriculum and help to create a more intentional approach to those changes and the design of the curriculum as it applies to the mission of the institution.

APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL FROM STUDY SITE

Version 03/01/08

VALENCIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Human Research Protection (HRP) Institutional Review Board (IRB)

IRB Determination Form

Title of Research Protocol: General Education Reform: A Grounded Theory Analysis

Principal Investigator (PI): Dan Dutkofski

Date Received by IRB Chair: 04/16/10

IRB Number: 10-017

Based on the IRB Protocol Initial Submission Form (or, as appropriate, the IRB Continuing Review/Termination Form or the IRB Addendum/Modification Form) submitted by the Principal Investigator and for the project identified above, the following determination has been made by the Valencia IRB:

☒ The research is exempt from IRB review. Exemption category: 2

☐ The research is eligible for expedited review and has been approved.

☐ The research is eligible for expedited review but requires modifications and re-submission before approval can be given.

☐ The research is subject to full review and will be discussed at the next IRB meeting, currently scheduled for _____.
(date)

☐ The research has been subjected to full review and has been approved.

☐ The research has been subjected to full review and has been disapproved.

Period of Approval: 05/01/10 to 12/31/10
(cannot be retroactive)

Exemption from Valencia IRB review does not exempt the PI or Co-PI from compliance with all applicable institutional, Federal, State, and local rules, regulations, policies, and procedures.

Although the IRB has determined that this application is exempt from IRB review, the Principal Investigator is encouraged to read, understand, and apply the attached Investigator Responsibilities document, which is required of Principal Investigators whose research protocols are approved under the Valencia IRB full or expedited review process.

If you have any remaining questions about Valencia's IRB process, contact the IRB Chair at irb@valenciacc.edu .

Elizabeth T. Gonzalez

Signature of IRB Chair or Designated Representative — Date: 04/26/10

C: IRB File, IRB Members, PI Supervisor/Administrator

APPENDIX B
IRB APPROVAL FROM UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Daniel Dutkofski**

Date: **May 18, 2010**

Dear Researcher:

On 5/18/2010, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Review
Project Title:	General Education Reform at a Community College: A Grounded Theory Study
Investigator:	Daniel Dutkofski
IRB Number:	SBE-10-06931
Funding Agency:	None

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Joseph Bielitzki, DVM, UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Janice Turchin on 05/18/2010 12:37:33 PM EDT

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

General Education Curriculum development process Interview

Date and time: _____

Name:_____

Role at school: administrator --- faculty: gen ed/faculty ---- not gen ed faculty

My name is Dan Dutkofski. I am working on an approved research study at the University of Central Florida regarding the underlying theory guiding our process of developing and reforming the general education program here at the college.

The study will involve both interviews with those involved in the design and assessment of the general education program as well as published policies and procedures. Do you have any questions at this time?

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. Before we begin the interview, I would like to reassure you that this interview will be confidential and the tape and transcripts will be available only to me.

Do you mind if I record the interview? _____

<if yes> If there is anything you don't want me to record; just let me know and I will turn off the recorder . You are under no obligation to answer any or all of the questions and may choose to pass on particular questions or stop the interview at any time.

There are no correct or incorrect answers to these questions; what I am documenting is what is in place at the college at this time in terms of the understanding and development of the general education program.

Excerpts of this interview may be made part of the final research report, but under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics be included in this report.

Is it all right for me to turn on the recorder now?

1. What is your understanding of general education?
    a. Why does the college have a general education program?
    b. What should general education look like?
2. What are the requirements of the general education program?
    a. What are the strengths of the current program?
    b. What are the weaknesses of the current program?
    c. Should there be different requirements between students pursuing the A.A. degree and the A.S. degree?
    d. Should there be a difference between the requirements at a community college and a university?
3. How do changes occur in general education here at the college?
    a. Who leads the changes? Who should?
    b. What efforts to reform general education have been successful?
    c. What efforts to reform general education have failed?
4. What was your experience of general education in your undergraduate program?
5. Were there things I did not ask which you think are important to note?

Thank you very much for both your time and your insights. I would again like to assure you that the information you have given will be used exclusively for this research and will not be able to be associated with you personally in the final written analysis.

APPENDIX D
CURRICULUM COMMITTEE WEB SITE
GENERAL EDUCATION PRINCIPLES

Principles and Procedures

Approved December 6, 2007

Principles: Courses within the General Education Program will:

1. be able to meet the A.A., A.S., and A.A.S. degree requirements;
2. significantly contribute to Valencia's general education outcomes;
3. not narrowly focus on those skills, techniques, and procedures specific to a particular occupation or profession;
4. be transferrable for all programs
5. contribute significantly to breadth of knowledge

Procedures: In keeping with SACS Comprehensive Standard 3.4.10, *the institution places primary responsibility for the content, quality, and effectiveness of the curriculum with its faculty*, the Curriculum Committee will serve as the eligible voters for changes to the General Education program. However, effective collaboration and communication will be a part of all General Education decisions made at the college.

1. When deciding course additions to or deletions from the General Education program, the discipline-specific voter eligibility list will serve as a means of communication and collaboration.

2. In matters which relate to major changes across the five General Education areas, there will be communication from the faculty Co-Chair of the Curriculum Committee to all tenured and tenure-track faculty at the college. This communication will include the proposed change, the timetable for decision-making, access to resources for decision input, identification of opportunities to provide input, and required date of response.

The Issue of Breadth: In order to ensure consistency with decisions regarding the addition of courses to the General Education program, the following questions will be addressed:

1. Does the course contribute significantly to satisfying the General Education Outcomes? (Yes)

2. Does this course, when added to the General Education program, satisfy the mission of Valencia Community College (Yes)

3. Is this course specific to a particular faculty member? (No)

4. Does this course focus on a specific occupation? (No)

5. Will this course, if added, be transferable to upper division programs? (Yes)

6. Does this course have prerequisites that are not General Education courses? (No)

APPENDIX E
CHRONOLOGY OF REPORTS AND PROPOSALS FOR GENERAL EDUCATION REFORM, 1984-1994

A chronology of critical reports and proposals for General education reform, 1984-1994

1984 *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education.* William Bennett, National Endowment for the Humanities.

1984 *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education.* Study Group on the Condition of Excellence in American Higher Education, National Institute of Education.

1985 *Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community.* Task Force of the Association of American Colleges.

1985 *Higher Education and the American Resurgence.* Frank Newman. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

1986 *To Secure the Blessings of Liberty. Report of the National Commission on the Role and Future of State Colleges and Universities.* American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

1986 *Time for Results: The Governors' 1991 Report on Education.* National Governors' Association, Center for Policy Research and Analysis.

1986 *Transforming the State Role in Higher Education.* Education Commission of the States.

1987 *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America.* Ernest L. Boyer. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

1988 *A New Vitality in General Education.* Task Group on General Education. Association of American Colleges.

1988 *Unfinished Design: The Humanities and Social Sciences in Undergraduate Engineering Education.* Joseph S. Johnson, Jr., Susan Shaman, and Robert Zemsky.

1988 *Humanities in America: A Report to the President, the Congress, and the American People.* Lynne V. Cheney. National Endowment for the Humanities.

1988 *Strengthening the Ties That Bind: Integrating Undergraduate Liberal and Professional Studies.* Joan S. Stark and Malcom A. Lowther. Professional Preparation Network, University of Michigan.

1989 *50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students.* Lynne V. Cheney. National Endowment for the Humanities.

1990 *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities for the Professorate.* Ernest L. Boyer. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

1991 *The Challenge of Connecting Learning.* Project on Liberal Learning, Study-in-Depth, and the Arts and Sciences Major. Association of American Colleges.

1991 *Reports from the Fields.* Project on Liberal Learning, Study-in-Depth, and the Arts and Sciences Major. Association of American Colleges.

1992 *Program Review and Educational Quality in the Major.* Project on Liberal Learning, Study-in-Depth, and the Arts and Sciences Major. Association of American Colleges.

1993 *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education.* Wingspread Group on Higher Education. The Johnson Foundation and others.

1994 *Sustaining Vitality in General Education.* Project on Strong Foundations for General Education. Association of American Colleges.

Taken from Lattuca& Stark (2009, p. 51)

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APPENDIX F
COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

Safdar, Sheik - Hoboken

From: Dan Dutkofski [ddutkofski@knights.ucf.edu]
Sent: Friday, April 09, 2010 12:07 PM
To: Permissions - US
Subject: permission for use in dissertation

I am preparing to write my doctoral dissertation and would like to use a table from Lattuca & Stark's (2009) *Shaping the college curriculum.* It would be retyped and appear as an appendix with the citation that it is taken from page 51 of that text. It is the chronology of critical reports and proposals for general education reform.

Is the citation sufficient or would I need copyright clearance to use this table?

Thank you.

Dan Dutkofski
Dean, Division of Fine Arts
Valencia Community College
1800 S. Kirkman Rd.
Orlando FL 32811
407-582-1300

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