



The Case for Skills-Based General Education

A New Approach to Ensure Value
and Relevance

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INTRODUCTION

» In a perfect world, the value of general education would be implicitly understood.

General education is, to quote one regional accreditor,¹ intended to impart “broad knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and develops skills and attitudes that the institution believes every college-educated person should possess.” A large part of the value of a bachelor’s degree can be credited to the general education model.

It’s unfortunate, then, that students so often do not see the value or relevance of general education. They periodically, and often loudly, complain about these seemingly arbitrary requirements. The headlines are perennial: “It’s Time to Get Rid of Distribution Requirements,”² “General education classes ruin learning,”³ “Are GE classes really worth it?”⁴

The perceived lack of relevance leads to a host of compounding effects. Some students respond by taking more of their core coursework at a community college, which may cause problems in the transfer process.

Others might coast through general education courses, feeling like they are wasting time and money. And often, the way that general education is explained (or not) in course catalogs or by advisors exacerbates this perception. From this point of view, it’s no wonder that students’ experience with general education makes them question the value of their college experience as a whole.

Part of the problem is that general education is, by design, broad and dispersed. But that intention isn’t always clearly communicated, or understood. Without awareness of the intention behind the design, general education curriculum can be seen as random lists of courses in disparate disciplines that never stack up into anything substantial—like a minor, certificate or microcredential. It becomes an arbitrary requirement to fulfill, or a checklist that takes time and attention away from a student’s area of interest, their major.

¹ Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, “General Education,” [2016](#), [www.sacscoc.org/~/media/Files/2016/04/General-Education-Requirements-2016.pdf](#).

² “It’s Time to Get Rid of Distribution Requirements,” [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), 2020.

³ “General Education Classes Ruin Learning,” [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), 2016.

⁴ “Are GE Classes Really Worth It?” [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), 2014.



» Educators know that the strengths of general education lie in helping students develop a foundation in broad, **human skills** rather than the specific **technical skills** and knowledge imparted in any given major.⁵ In other words, the breadth and integration of the general curriculum provide a counterbalance for the depth and specificity of the major.

Employers, too, know the value of the skills developed by a general education curriculum. Time and again, they affirm that human skills are essential to success on the job, most recently in surveys conducted for the Association for American Colleges & Universities.⁶ This is backed by our research into online job postings data, where human skills are requested alongside technical skills, both equally desired.

So if educators see the value of general education, and employers see it too, how do we get students on board?

Consider skills. Every course in the university is designed to impart students with knowledge and/or skills. The language of skills bridges all academic disciplines, putting general education and the major on an even footing. And skills connect all components of an undergraduate education to each student's own professional goals.

By using skills to describe general education curriculum, we can reveal and communicate the value that already exists in it, and leverage the skills language as a way to critically examine and reconnect general education to the world of work.



⁶Ar. k. r. r. k. , **How College Contributes to Workforce Success**, 2021.



» In the classroom, students experience greater learning when they know what they are expected to learn, how they'll learn it, and why.⁷ When students do not know what they are expected to learn, they flounder. Faculty and instructors tend to focus, understandably, on the disciplinary course content of their courses (what), without mentioning the human skills that students are expected to develop alongside (how), or the relevance to the world of work (why).

For example, in a study linking classroom learning with the world of work, authors Steven C. Taylor and human skills y

⁷ Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2016. [https://www.aacsb.edu/~/media/Files/2016/04/2016-04-20-Ann-Arbor-Report.pdf](#)

University of Michigan, *Beyond Classroom Borders*, 2020. [https://www.umich.edu/~bcb/](#)



taxonomies tend to be organized by discipline, focused on conveying the skills and knowledge students will receive as part of their specific training in their field(s) of study. There is a tendency to overlook general education requirements, which are not “owned” by any particular discipline and tend to be organized by institution-level learning outcomes. When students skip directly to the requirements of their prospective major, they skip over the general education section of the catalog and thus encounter general education requirements as explained in footnotes—as an add-on.

Without a skills-based language, there is very little hope of being consistent or explicit in referring to general education in a course catalog or advising discussion. With such a heavy focus on the major, general education becomes learning that’s stuffed in around the edges, rather than a load-bearing part of the undergraduate experience. As such, general education (and human skills) becomes invisible. And when something is invisible, it’s not planned for, discussed, taught, or learned.

Introducing the language of skills allows the value of general education to become visible, providing a common thread that connects these courses.

By deliberately bringing awareness to general education as a skill-building exercise, students understand more of what they are intended to get out of the general education curriculum, and thus can spend more time learning rather than questioning.

» Introducing skills into conversations about academic planning right from the start aligns students’ academic options with their future career goals. Instead of exclusively framing general education as a list of requirements, or merely as a springboard to personal development, general education can be presented as intended: broad, relevant, cross-contextual learning.

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TEACHING

» With the importance of skills already defined at a curricular level, instructors can then teach from a position of strength, knowing that students already have an idea of why they are taking any given general education course. As referenced above, with skills already identified and reinforced on the syllabus, instructors are positioned to be more mindful and intentional in approaching skill-development in their lesson plans, assignments, and overall approach. Bringing skills more explicitly to mind could also spark conversations introducing students to real-world problems.

As a skills-based infrastructure becomes more robust, instructors will be increasingly able to share resources for explicit, clear teaching in general education courses. For more, we examine a skills-based approach to teaching in depth in our work tailored for faculty.⁹

LEARNING

» Because general education has now been contextualized for students within a framework of real-world value, students have a better idea of what they can gain from those courses, and

how general education connects to their future careers. When students are more aware of the benefit they'll get from the courses, they become more confident in their academic abilities.¹⁰

With this confidence, and knowledge that skills apply to the “real world,” students may have a better idea of how to articulate their skills and learning to themselves and others—employers, family, and friends.

» With skills, we have a mechanism to transform general education from a checklist exercise to real learning by providing an interface between the curriculum, its utility to students, and eventual use in their future careers. Because students now have a relevant framework and rationale for the intention behind the general education, it's more likely that they will connect general education to their own academic and career goals.

“WITH SKILLS, WE HAVE A MECHANISM TO TRANSFORM GENERAL EDUCATION FROM A CHECKLIST EXERCISE TO REAL LEARNING”

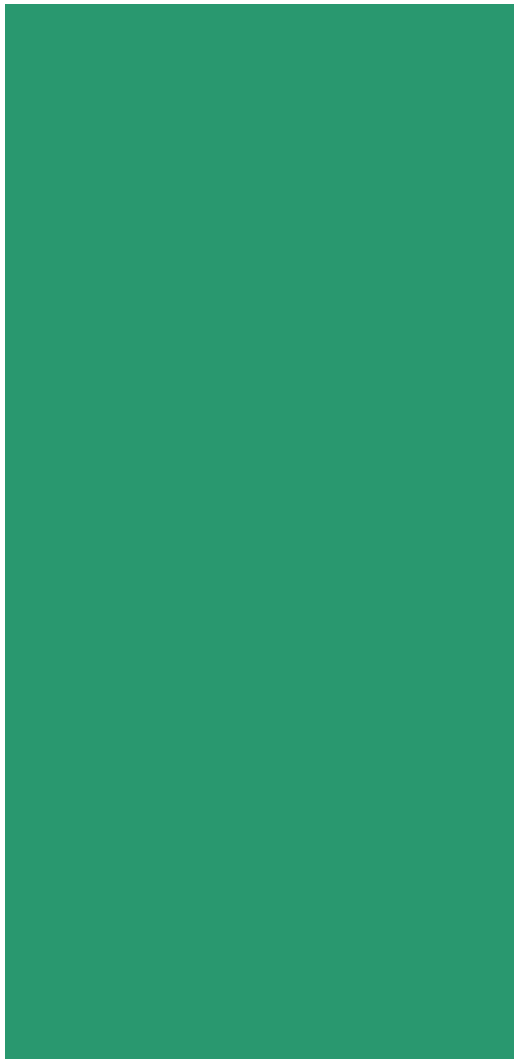
⁹ See the authors' work on skills-based general education, *Skills-Based General Education: A Framework for the 21st Century* (2021).
¹⁰ See the authors' work on skills-based general education, *Skills-Based General Education: A Framework for the 21st Century* (2021).
¹¹ See the authors' work on skills-based general education, *Skills-Based General Education: A Framework for the 21st Century* (2021).



Reconnect to the World of Work

» No matter how clearly skills are defined in general education courses, if those skills are not actually taught, or if the curriculum is missing some of the skills that employers want in the job market (or that would be attractive to faculty seeking graduate students), any improvements to communication are pointless.

Fortunately, skills also facilitate feedback and analysis of the general education curriculum. Using skills to critically analyze general education allows discussion of missed opportunities or updates to the curriculum.



Work, Resilient Skills, 2020, Career-Ready Education, 201, Degrees at



While by no means definitive



Although developing this deeper level of skills articulation would require longer-term consideration and discussion, it may be worth pursuing. Perhaps it's time for a microcredential on teamwork, or an ePortfolio that demonstrates growth in self-discipline. Depending on institutional mission, student interest, and the needs of regional employers, it may be worth articulating these types of skills.

INTERFACE WITH THE MAJOR

» Still other skills, such as customer service, management, sales, or operations, may be missing completely from the general education curriculum. And perhaps that's a good thing. Business-specific skills may be better taught specifically in a business setting. But consider the tendency of many liberal arts graduates to pursue careers in sales, marketing, and public relations,¹⁷ or the fact that sales skills are requested in 23% of online job postings.¹⁸ There may be more overlap between discipline-specific skills and a broad education than commonly acknowledged.

With this in mind, it may be worth considering the points at which the general education curriculum overlaps with those essential, but still discipline-specific skills. In these liminal areas, skills could be used to better integrate

the values and breadth of a general education with the world of work. Students who go into sales, for instance, would benefit from a solid foundation in ethical reasoning. Business operations tap into many variations of quantitative reasoning, in such specific skills like financial literacy, basic statistical fluency, and data visualization. Management and customer service would both benefit from the basics of economics and psychology. There are many opportunities to bring elements of a general education into the context of the modern labor market.

» Using skills as a mechanism to examine and improve the general education curriculum opens up an approach that connects the enduring tenets of a general education and the skills that students will need to succeed. This gives colleges and universities the opportunity to reexamine their curriculum in light of the many economic and cultural developments that have occurred over past decades.

Since general education courses are a high-impact learning opportunity required of all students, continued attention to the relevance of general education also ensures that skills are taught equitably across the student body, further advancing the intent of a general education.

¹⁷  Robot Ready, 2011.

¹⁸  Resilient Skills, 2020.



CONCLUSION

**» Human skills are timeless,
which has always been the
essence of general education.**

As the economy continues to flux, undergraduate institutions must navigate a central tension: keeping step with the ever-developing (technical) skills needed for the jobs of the future, while also providing



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Thank You

