

The **General College Vision**

Integrating Intellectual Growth,
Multicultural Perspectives,
and Student Development

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This book is dedicated to all of the General College undergraduate and graduate students, staff, faculty, and administrators, past and present, who have contributed to the GC vision for access and excellence in higher education. The synergy of the General College is the sum of its parts. This book seeks to recognize the significance that each individual's role has had in achieving an overall vision for the General College community.

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Preface

Martha E. Casazza

We must create academies that are warm and nurturing and supportive learning communities that don't have biases that tend to exclude but rather are supportive of anyone who is willing to work hard and take the opportunities that are there. When we become more exclusionary, especially in an era where more students are not being prepared for the rigors of higher education, it is kind of self-defeating. (David Taylor, Dean, as quoted in Casazza & Bauer)

This statement was made during an interview for an oral history research project that is currently exploring access to higher education in the United States. The researchers are interviewing educators and students across the country to gather perspectives on how academic excellence is compatible with providing access to students who have traditionally been denied access to a postsecondary education. The supposed incompatibility between access and excellence has been debated for years across higher education, and the argument seems to gain strength during times of slashed budgets when institutions look for ways to cut services to students. Even though less than 1% of the public higher education budget nationally is spent on developmental education, decreasing support for underprepared students frequently heads the list of cutbacks, especially when it is accompanied by the rationale that it will help to raise academic standards. In addition, many states are limiting developmental instruction to 2-year and technical colleges. Since the mid-1980s, 30 states have proposed policies to limit this type of instructional support to these institutions. This concept, in effect, narrows the point of access to higher education and sets up rather exclusionary standards.

These trends are occurring when college enrollments are burgeoning. Between 1960 and 2001, they grew from 4.1 million to 14.8 million students. Ninety percent of high school seniors expect to attend college while only 47% of high school graduates have completed college preparatory curricula. Forty percent of students in 4-year postsecondary institutions takes developmental courses while the overall percentage for all institutions is 53%. Enrollment across colleges and universities is expected to grow, and by 2015 1 to 2 million additional young adults, many of whom will come from low income and minority families, will seek access to higher education (National Panel Report of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002).

At the same time, employers today are increasingly looking for individuals who can process information and have good communication skills. A college education is no longer an option; indeed, it is becoming a requirement if one wants career choices. There are very few unskilled jobs left in this country. By 2008, 14.1 million new jobs will require a bachelor's degree or at least some postsecondary education, more than double those requiring high school completion or below (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002).

Access to higher education is a social imperative that we must take seriously. It is clear that the General College of the University of Minnesota has historically taken this mission with earnestness and centrality. It is also clear that the General College continues to serve as a national model for how access and excellence are not only compatible but provide a distinct and positive energy for the entire learning community in which they exist. No one can express this synergy more effectively than a student who has experienced it. The following words come directly from a General College student who is quoted in one of the chapters contained in this excellent historical document.

As I continue to gain momentum in my pursuit of my degree, I wished to discredit the presumption that I have less academic potential than my peers in other colleges. Every success that I have had has been a direct reflection of . . . General College's support and encouragement of them and lastly the application of hard work and persistency by myself. As a General College student, I seek to follow in the precedent set by the successful General College alumni that have traveled before us. One of which has won the Nobel Peace Prize . . . Each student within the General College student body has it in them to succeed. By abstaining from the quicksand of mediocrity and pressing on towards our academic goals, we will harvest tomorrow's leaders from those society was content to let slip down society's proverbial cracks. (Joshua Schmitt, Chapter 2)

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Foreword

*Daniel Detzner, Robert Poch,
and David V. Taylor*

Over the past 15 years the General College (GC) has been the subject of inquiry from colleges and universities across the nation seeking to implement academic support curricula for “underprepared” students. The attraction of the General College experience is that it is a multidisciplinary program that embeds academic skills development into courses. This innovative concept has been presented at conferences and professional meetings and is nationally acclaimed.

The General College is the product of 73 years of exploration, experimentation, and refinement. It grew out of a curricular expression initially described as a general education experience; that is to say, introductory courses in the sciences, social sciences, and the humanities, designed to make the liberal arts curriculum of that day more accessible to the average first-year student. This approach, coupled with the use of academic advisors, another innovation stemming from the 1930s and 1940s, provided a more holistic approach to the then-burgeoning field of academic instruction and student services. Today, the General College mission statement reads as follows:

The mission of the General College of the University of Minnesota is to develop, through teaching, research, and service, the potential for baccalaureate education in students who are serious about fulfilling their previous undeveloped or unrecognized academic promise. The General College seeks to generate and apply knowledge concerning how best to understand, broaden, and deepen academic achievement in our increasingly diverse, multicultural society. The General College selects for admission those students who can best benefit from their early integration into the total University community, who can demonstrate that they have the motivation and determination to achieve, and who are willing to direct their energy to a rigorous baccalaureate education at the University of Minnesota. (General College, 2005)

The impetus for this book is derived in part by explaining what it is that we do and to discern future directions for this work. It is also driven by definitions ascribed to our work, that is, “developmental education” and an even newer vision and vocabulary for the future that captures the integration of a variety of theories, pedagogies, and evaluation measures that fully support diverse and rapidly changing student populations. Given the demographic shift in Minnesota’s population, the authors in this book have expressed an imperative that we look centrally at the experiences of the learner in higher education through a different set of lenses if we are to be successful in preparing all learners.

Defining What We Do

Practitioners of postsecondary developmental education and those professionals in higher education who are committed to supporting learning for all individuals entering colleges and universities have discussed what to call the work of programs such as General College. The outdated term “remedial” suggests deficits where students come to be fixed to acceptable standards of higher education. Remediation is not, and has never been, the work of GC, despite popular misconceptions that sometimes are applied in describing our work. The more recently accepted terminology of developmental education suggests a more comprehensive approach to serving and supporting the learning of all students. General College has provided a unique form of developmental education to students who demonstrate potential to be successful in college despite past academic measures. Some believe that the term developmental education is still widely misunderstood and confused with remedial education by those outside of the field, sometimes leading to ongoing misperceptions about the work of a college such as GC. That is why General College is in a unique position to redefine and continue to evolve definitions of what it means to support learners in higher education. Thus, what GC does is far more comprehensive than any standard term that has been applied yet to describe our work, though terms like “access,” “developmental education,” “learning assistance,” “human development,” and “multicultural developmental education” offer informative descriptions about our approach.

Instead of apologizing that our students do not measure up to their peers with high standardized test scores and the best high school grades, we always affirm that all students are distinct individuals, they develop at different rates, and they may not have had the same privileges and opportunities. In the age of “no child left behind” federal policies, the work of higher educators contin-

ues to focus on the transitions and educational development of students who did not have equal experiences in K-12. Because the achievement gap still exists, programs like GC remain essential to closing this gap.

Our faculty in General College, as noted in this book's chapters, work with students who are struggling to overcome the barriers in their lives while affirming their intellectual strengths. Despite terminology that continues to evolve to describe the work we do, this is what GC is about. The college affirms all individuals and their potential to achieve, be retained, and graduate through curricula, teaching, research, and service to the wider community.

A Developmental Education Curriculum

The curriculum of the General College goes far beyond the traditional developmental education courses in writing and mathematics and embraces multicultural approaches and discipline-based learning skills into the core of sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities courses. Later chapters in this book reveal the many ways that General College courses foster educational development. General College faculty are researchers as well as teachers, so they are also studying the educational and multicultural development of underrepresented students. General College classrooms are sites for pedagogical and curricular experimentation as well as places where students figure out how best to succeed.

Future research opportunities for General College faculty and staff will focus on how to link courses, pedagogies, faculty, and students into communities of learning that go beyond content, bits of information, and discipline-based ways of knowing. Learning community models, which have been developed and examined across the country as a way to strengthen the first-year experience, have caught the attention of General College faculty and staff. We are now beginning to think more holistically about our course offerings and how they might be able to generate more synergy within the context of learning communities.

The importance of synergy between courses and pedagogies, the linking of intellectual content with social goals, and the creating of an atmosphere where a sense of community is developed seem critical if we are to take the next steps forward to work with students who are underrepresented in higher education. Students attending the University of Minnesota, a large urban university, do not always feel a sense of community. The challenge will be to create that sense of community not only in specially designed courses, and in a series of linked courses, but in every course taught by every member of the General College teaching staff and faculty.

Student Services: The Co-Curriculum

In many respects the co-curricular field of student development was pioneered nationally by faculty in the General College during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. From the early work of Cornelia “Queen” McCune (Johnson, 2003), who conducted extensive research on students for the enhancement of student counseling in the mid-1930s, to today’s General College counselor advocates, the goal remains the same—to anticipate, assess, and respond to students’ needs in ways that produce engagement and commitment to academic success.

As we look to the future, the commitment to student development must begin with precollegiate student outreach programs. Students must be academically prepared and motivated to attend postsecondary institutions. We must make better use of institutional data on student academic success in admissions decisions. We must assess student strengths and weaknesses to better identify skill development needs and opportunities. Finally, we must collaborate more effectively with other instructional and counseling units throughout the University of Minnesota. Such collaboration will enable effective student collegiate planning, matriculation, assessment, advisement, skill development, retention, and graduation.

The increasingly diverse cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds of Minnesota’s K-12 students require proactive communication and contact within schools and communities that historically serve students with low college attendance rates. Assessment and the utilization of assessment results are needed to assist General College students as they are admitted and to ensure their continued development in other key areas affecting student success, such as study skills, time management, and test preparation. Skillful use of assessment information can enhance retention, transfer, and graduation rates and can be used to inform both early awareness messaging and collegiate admissions.

Finally, as General College students transfer into other academic programs at the University of Minnesota to complete their baccalaureate degrees, further communication and collaboration with the transfer colleges will be a core feature of learning more about the academic performance and preparation of our students. The optimal goal is the creation of a supportive web of academic and counseling services that is essentially seamless from elementary school through baccalaureate degree.

General College and the Future

The composition of the General College student body suggests that we are on the frontlines of a demographic change in higher education. Almost 50% of the General College student body currently is comprised of students of color. These students represent historically underrepresented populations in the United States as well as growing immigrant populations.

The changing classroom demography suggests the need for more research on how these students learn best. The lessons that we have learned, and the past research that we have conducted, will be important to developing workable strategies for engaging with and teaching these students.

It is clear that we do not have all the answers because we are only now beginning to ask the right questions. This book is a step in that direction, but the distance to be traveled remains far. General College's vision is to continue to develop learners and transform institutions to make learning accessible and successful for all those who wish to participate in higher education. We are hopeful that the insights in this book will assist our colleagues in higher education across the world with this endeavor.

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