From Dean of Undergraduate Studies Jeffrey Wolcowitz ...

General Education Requirements: Why Do We Have Them? How Should We Think About Them?

Requirements of any kind often generate negative reactions. They remind us of being told to eat our vegetables if we wanted to have dessert. Someone is telling us to do something that we would not have chosen to do on our own. I recall a time when a department chair was being urged to add a requirement for students in that major because it would be an important statement about what that major was about. The department chair’s response was to ask why add the stigma of a requirement to a course that almost all students were already taking voluntarily (voluntarily, that is, after a considerable amount of advising!).

That said, I have sympathy for the view that, regardless of whether students would meet general education requirements voluntarily, they provide an important statement about what we stand for as an institution and what others can expect of a CWRU graduate. At the same time, while most of you would voluntarily take courses that meet the goals of general education requirements – and many already take additional courses beyond the requirement – we need to ensure that everyone meets a minimal threshold if the University is to meet its obligation to guide your education. Whether to make a clear statement about what we stand for or to make you eat your spinach, we have general education requirements.

So, what is it that we are trying to achieve through the SAGES, physical education, and breadth requirements? We could surely generate as many rationales as there are members of our community, and those various rationales would justify different parts of the requirements with perhaps few people embracing all of the current requirements. Let me put aside the specific form our requirements take, but offer a few of my own perspectives on the value of general education.

First, general education requirements introduce, exercise, reinforce, and extend academic skills. Regardless of what we do in life, we need to communicate clearly, be able to make presentations to others (whether to one person or to an audience of thousands), and work in teams. All courses provide practice on one or more of these skills, but it is important to have venues where these skills are central.

Second, courses that satisfy general education requirements often force us to think about big questions that we might not otherwise pause to ponder. What does it mean to be ethical? What does it mean to lead a good life? Do people from other parts of the world think about these questions in the same way? Not only is it useful to think about these big issues in a systematic way with a faculty mentor, but there are also benefits from doing it with students from different backgrounds and who are pursuing different goals. As Professor Andrew Delbanco of Columbia University, author of College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be, pointed out at a recent Baker-Nord Center talk, it is a peculiarly American ideal of higher education to take time between adolescence and adulthood to pause, think about these questions, and invent ourselves in ways that may be different from our parents.

Third, while we often think about college as preparation for a career, we also want to prepare you for a satisfying life of engagement in local, national, and international communities. General education requirements can be seen as education for citizenship. You take courses in a broad range of fields so that you can think critically about public policy issues that will motivate your choice of political candidates; courses that give you an appreciation of how people different from you live their lives;
courses that add to your appreciation of art, music, and literature; and courses that will prepare you to think carefully about the moral dilemmas that the future will bring.

Fourth, and for me the most important, is that, by requiring that you spend time studying a wide range of topics, general education requirements provide you with flexibility to adapt to a changing world and confidence to learn new things. The one thing I know for sure is that I cannot predict what you will need to know to thrive as adults and adapt to a changing job market. Nonetheless, I am certain that we can give you a foundation for learning new things later in life and the confidence to do so without hesitation. We will have failed you if years from now you feel that you cannot learn about the latest scientific breakthroughs or events in some distant part of the world. This will be important both for your career and for your everyday life.

The four frames that I suggest are hardly exhaustive and certainly not mutually exclusive. It is worth thinking about why we add the stigma of a requirement to what might otherwise be good advice that we can expect students to follow. So, in the spirit of good advice, I suggest that you think about the goals of your college education and the value of general education as you place courses in your shopping cart or reflect back on what you have accomplished at CWRU.

*Let me know what you think. You can write to me at jeffrey.wolcowitz@case.edu.*