

The General Education Act Renews Liberal Education in America



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On Nov. 16, the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal in North Carolina, and the National Association of Scholars in New York City (I serve on the board) will host online, Recentring our Universities, to release to the public The General Education Act. The GEA is a detailed model bill directing the establishment of Schools of General Education at public universities. Written by EPPC's Stanley Kurtz, the Martin Center's Jenna Robinson, and NAS's David Randall, the model legislation sets forth guiding principles, basic courses, institutional structure, funding exigencies, and a timetable for implementation of centers of true liberal education.

The GEA contains the most ambitious legislative proposal for higher education reform in living memory. It could not be timelier.

It has long been evident that higher education in America has lost its way. Colleges and universities have largely cleansed the curriculum of requirements that students study the essential ideas and events of America's great experiment in ordered liberty, Western civilization more broadly, and, despite multiculturalist zeal, other civilizations. Colleges and universities have entrenched the censorious spirit that spawned trigger warnings, microaggressions, safe spaces, and bias response teams – all aimed at protecting students from exposure to non-progressive opinions and at shielding them from facts that clash with left-wing narratives and fashionable campus causes. And colleges and universities have incorporated diversity, equity, and inclusion training and anti-racism instruction into university bureaucracies and classrooms. These inculcate – in faculty as well as in students – allegiance to the dogmas that America is racist to the core, and citizens, private institutions, and government must transform social and political life by classifying individuals, and redistributing benefits and burdens, based on race.

Last month may have marked a turning point. Many who had averted their gaze from the nation's dysfunctional universities have been shocked by campus support for Hamas terrorists – who massacred some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, in Israel on Oct. 7 and kidnapped more than 240, also largely civilians – and by university administrators who, confronted by students and faculty taking the jihadists' side and calling for the elimination of the Jewish state, suddenly rediscovered the importance of free speech. In the face of students' and professors' defense of the perpetrators of mass atrocities and following weak-kneed and equivocating statements from university presidents and deans, demands have multiplied for higher education reform.

The General Education Act charts a path of renewal. In states that adopt it, designated public universities will be required to establish Schools of General Education as independent academic units devoted to traditional liberal education. Presidents of these universities must appoint a School of General Education dean who will report directly to them. The dean will be responsible for forming a large new faculty with its own procedures for hiring, promoting, and granting tenure. The Schools of General Education will be obliged to enact bylaws affirming the commitment to promoting rigorous intellectual inquiry in pursuit of truth; cultivating the dispositions and skills that produce independence of mind; maintaining intellectual diversity; and safeguarding free speech and nurturing lively discussion. Honoring these principles alone would go a long way to fostering the tolerance, civility, and public-spiritedness that is sorely lacking on American campuses and beyond.

The GEA mandates that Schools of General Education offer a well-rounded set of 13 courses – and only the 13 elaborated in the act – as a graduation requirement for bachelor's degree students (the GEA reduces to 10 the number of core courses that must be completed by Bachelor of Science degree students in recognition of the often-intense course loads imposed by their majors). In addition to the mandatory core curriculum, Schools of General Education may require for graduation up to two courses in a foreign language.

The purpose is to enrich students' understanding of the beliefs, practices, and associations that formed the United States, acquaint them with the arguments on both sides of the questions and the controversies that have shaped the West, introduce them to non-Western cultures, and, all the while, refine their ability to think for themselves.

The required curriculum includes basic courses in rhetoric, math, science, and economics. It highlights America's founding principles, constitutional traditions, and political development. It covers the preeminent literature and philosophy, and the remarkable history – the debacles and tribulations as well as the achievements and grand moments – of Western civilization. It gives students a choice: an in-depth exploration of the principles of political liberty, fine arts from classical Greece to the 20th century, or the classics of economic freedom and its critics. It features a course on world civilizations. Where appropriate, these required courses will highlight the competing views about individual freedom and limited government around which the West has revolved.

In addition, the schools will offer a full slate of courses that allows students to major and minor in general education and to pursue graduate study. Not least, the schools will furnish instruction in a widely neglected matter: the origins, theory, and practice of liberal education, from its roots in classical Greece to its 19th-century restatement and the current crisis. Through their rich and varied offerings, Schools of General Education will not only prepare students for free and democratic citizenship but also train the next generation of scholars and teachers dedicated to understanding, preserving, and transmitting the treasures of Western civilization.

Recognizing the limits of legislation and the need for flexibility, the GEA mandates coverage of crucial topics, issues, ideas, documents, institutions, movements, revolutions, wars, eras, cultures, and nations without stipulating authoritative perspectives and settled conclusions. While directing teachers to build classes around the Great Books and recommending classic authors, the act avoids mandating specific works, syllabi, or bibliographies.

For example, among the required introductory survey courses that Schools of General Education must offer is “A 3 semester credit hour course of United States Government, which shall explore the founding principles of natural rights, liberty, equality, representative democracy, separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism, and constitutional self-government as they have played out over America’s history, chiefly through the study of original source material.”

The core curriculum also features “A 4 semester credit hour course of Western Humanities I 1000 B.C.-1450, which shall explore substantial selections from works of first-rank literary quality and enduring literary and philosophical influence, often called Great Books, with readings by figures such as Plato, Augustine, Dante, and the troubadours that include the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, Homeric epic, Greek philosophy, Greek tragedy, and medieval literature, and which includes a 1 semester credit hour component of English composition.”

The introductory survey courses contain “A 3 semester credit hour course of World Civilizations, which shall be a broad survey course covering the distinctive history, culture, literature, and social structure of at least four nations or culture areas to be selected from among China, India, the Islamic Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Russia, Japan, and Southeast Asia, with concentration on a representative country or countries permitted when a given culture area is under consideration.”

The introductory survey course on Western humanities in the ancient and medieval era departs from the other 12 required courses by mandating the study of specific books: the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. That exception is justified by their centrality to Western civilization.

Regardless of one’s personal beliefs, it is impossible to acquire a reasonable understanding of the development of art, economics, morality, politics, philosophy, or religion in the West without a decent acquaintance with the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. For two millennia, these books have done more than any other to discipline passions, excite hopes, stimulate imaginations, foster virtues and curb vices, define duties and transgressions, inspire literature, organize ideas, and inform the construction of institutions and the elaboration of laws. Most significantly, the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament teach that because every person is created in God’s image, morality and politics must give expression to human equality and to the shared dignity that stems from the freedom to choose the just and the good.

The GEA recognizes the considerable cost of establishing Schools of General Education. To fund them, the act directs university governing boards to reallocate substantial resources, fully or partially closing programs and departments, discharging faculty, and discontinuing tenure lines. That is an inevitable feature of serious educational reform and fully consistent with sound university governance, which permits universities to adjust budgetary allocations based on changed research priorities, altered teaching imperatives, and revised conceptions of educational mission.

Some will worry that the GEA politicizes education by increasing the involvement of non-academics in higher education. But the professors have shown that they can't be trusted to design and deliver liberal education. Moreover, the act summons state lawmakers and public university trustees to perform one of their key duties: ensure that taxpayer money is used for the vital purpose of preparing young men and women – progressive and conservative alike – to exercise the rights and shoulder the responsibilities of freedom.

The true civic education in America is liberal education, and the General Education Act provides the best available model for achieving it at our public universities.

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