

# RE-VISIONING GENERAL EDUCATION: THE LA SIERRA EXPERIENCE

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**A** remarkable thing happened on the way to a new general-education curriculum at La Sierra University. In a meeting of the board of trustees this past November, some of the trustees waxed philosophical—and enthusiastic—about a proposal they were considering. According to reliable sources, they said things like this:

“If there had been this kind of program a few years ago, my children might have gone to an Adventist college.”

“I wish my alma mater could have done this.”

“Now I can tell people what this university is really about.”

The trustees finally voted—not about the financial implications or practical feasibility of the proposal—but about the shape and content of the curriculum, about the kind of education to be of-

fered, and therefore about the nature and identity of their university.

What a college or university is “really about”—what it “stands for” in the contemporary world of higher edu-

cation—can be seen most clearly in its various curriculums. Here, far more accurately than in official statements and recruitment materials, are reflected the values and priorities that actually motivate the institution. And the heart of undergraduate curriculums is “general education”—courses that are offered to, and required of, all students working toward degrees. General education is independent of vocational intentions and career plans. It focuses on preparing students to live as informed, competent, conscientious, creative, and compassionate persons in the contemporary world.

This point needs to be made repeatedly because general education is usually something of an “ugly duckling” in higher education. Students seldom choose a college or university because of its general-education program. Parents are usually far more interested in the career prospects of their chil-

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dren's majors; faculty members often prefer to teach courses for students majoring in their discipline; and trustees are more interested in high-profile majors that will bring prestige and (it is hoped) contributions from major donors.

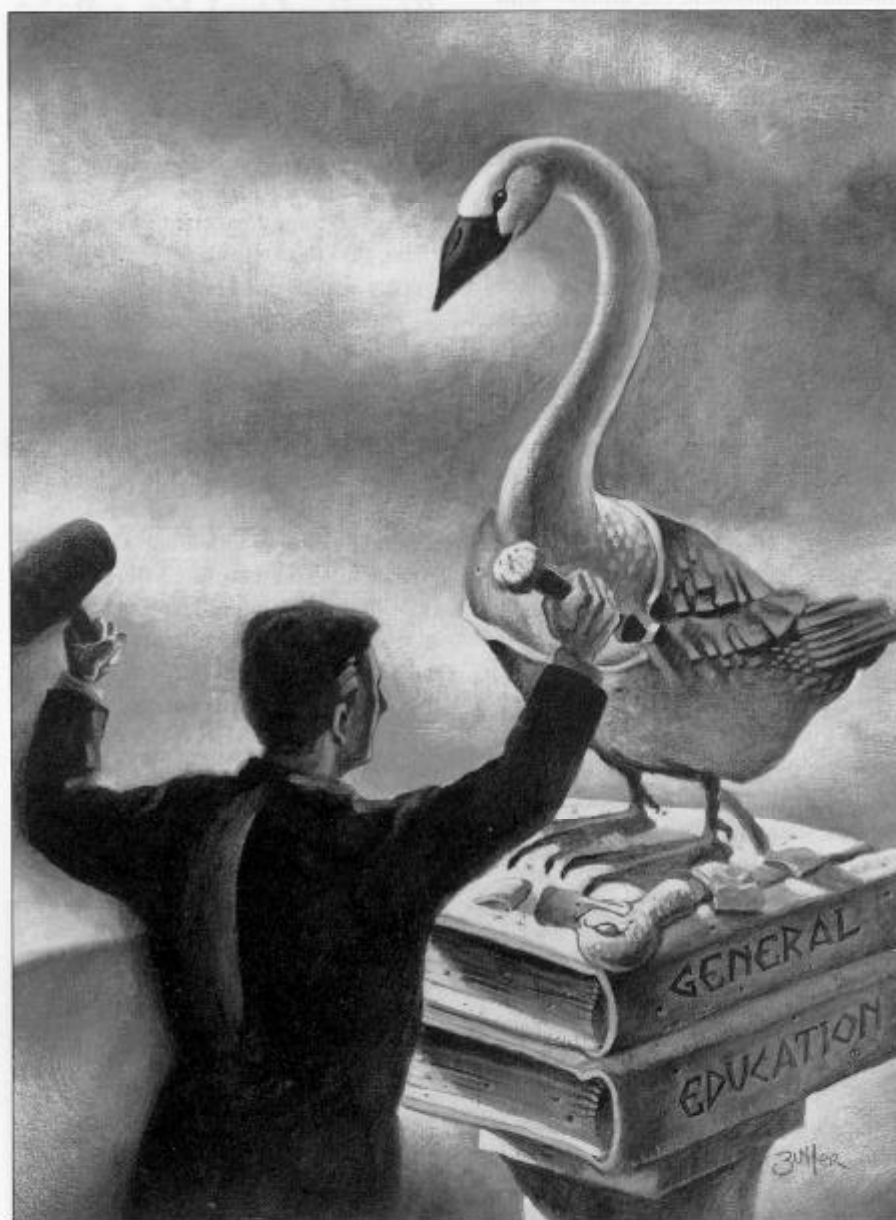
General education is not very glamorous. It doesn't generate impressive research and publication or bring a school great academic distinction. Yet general education is arguably the most important activity of a college or university, and potentially the most distinctive and permanently useful part of higher education. For it functions as a window on, and bridge to all of reality, including the student's existence as part of the larger—much, much larger—human story, as well as the mind-boggling natural universe that includes everything from subatomic particles to cosmic galaxies. At its best, general education deals with nothing less than our common humanity—those essential capacities and qualities that enable human beings to participate effectively and responsibly in a variety of shared intellectual, social, and moral contexts.

General education is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Beyond college, graduate and professional education are increasingly specialized; postdoctoral studies and research are even more so. And when people return to school in order to facilitate changes of career, they usually complete only the requirements for a different major. Nobody does general education over again. What students get the first time through is what they have—for better or for worse—for the rest of their lives.

So general education deserves continuing, vigorous discussion and debate. La Sierra's trustees were right to recognize the importance of a new general-education curriculum to the continuing self-definition of a new university. With the separation of the La Sierra campus from Loma Linda University in 1990 and its emergence as an independent institution, it needed to decide what kind of institution it would be—in relation to its neighboring public, private, and church-related institutions in southern California, as well as other

Adventist institutions in North America. This identity is developed and expressed not only in a mission statement and strategic plan, but also—and most concretely—in the new general-education curriculum. The trustee was right: Now we can show what La Sierra University is "really about."

and deliberation, as well as countless formal and informal presentations and discussions, all leading to the eventual approval of a new general-education curriculum by the faculty senate, the president's committee, and the board of trustees. Beginning in 1996-1997, the new curriculum will be phased in over



Approval by the trustees marks the midpoint in a nine-year process that will result in the most thoroughgoing revision of general education at La Sierra since baccalaureate degrees were first conferred in 1945. Launched in 1991, the current process has involved hundreds of hours of committee study

the next four academic years, with full implementation scheduled for 1999-2000.

The centerpiece of the new curriculum is a core of eight interdisciplinary, multicultural, team-taught courses. They comprise 29 quarter units of credit and integrate the behavioral and

social sciences, the humanities, and religion. Other components include a more rigorous set of competency requirements (23 units) in English composition, mathematics, non-English language and physical fitness; and required involvement in community-service activities. A significantly reduced breadth requirement (32 units)—with elective courses in the humanities, fine arts, natural sciences, behavioral sciences, and religion—completes the general-education package.

### The Process

In 1991, the university president appointed a new general-education committee of seven faculty members and two support personnel. He assigned it to examine the existing undergraduate general-education requirements, explore a wide range of curricular options, and suggest appropriate revisions.

The committee began by collecting and evaluating information. This included not only the various changes in general education at La Sierra during the past half-century, but also the Program in Interdisciplinary Studies in the 1970s and the current honors program. The committee surveyed faculty attitudes toward general education and examined general-education programs at other universities and colleges and the revised standards for undergraduate education published by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Subsequent recommendations by an on-site WASC evaluation team directed the committee's attention to a number of possibilities for improving the program.

The process of re-forming general education began with a serious effort of re-visioning. The committee concluded that the most appropriate formal preparation for a La Sierra graduate to meet the challenges of life in the 21st century would be a broad-based, flexible education founded in the liberal arts and sciences. Building on that belief, the committee endeavored to design a program that would not only enhance students' preparation for graduate school, the professions, and positions of leadership in all areas of society, but would also

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(and even more importantly) equip them with the skills they would need to pursue a lifetime of learning.

The committee also concluded that the existing general-education curriculum at La Sierra—a traditional “cafeteria style” program in which students took a specified amount of course work in designated areas—had several major defects. In particular, (1) it was built around discipline-based knowledge and basic skills and therefore offered little opportunity for interdisciplinary learning; and (2) it did little to systematically develop critical thinking. Lamentably, the results of recent writing and quantitative skills tests taken by seniors revealed that many graduates were leaving La Sierra with less than adequate skills in these areas.

In the spring of 1992, the committee presented an interim report, which proposed a modified general-education core curriculum—a concept that was approved in principle by the college, each of the professional schools, and the faculty senate. But there was a danger that the general-education cart might be getting in front of the strategic-planning horse. So for about a year, although the general-education committee continued to meet and interact with the strategic-planning committee, it ceased to advocate a specific general-education curriculum, pending further direction from the forthcoming strategic plan.

Early in 1994, the strategic-planning committee circulated a draft report that included the following “strategic direction” for the university:

*The University shall use its general education curriculum as the primary means of placing a distinctive academic stamp on all of its undergraduates. To address our commitment to the exploration and development of values, to increase the awareness of one's value structure as it relates to other cultures and religions, to integrate service into one's community and to one's environmental responsibility to society, the University will develop a general educational curriculum that focuses on these issues. Of equal importance is the demonstrated proficiency in English language composition, in quantitative skills, in a non-English language, and in the principles of personal health and fitness, including their relationship to public health.*

Having received the direction it was waiting for, the general-education committee brought to the university community a series of proposals for debate, revision, and (it was hoped) eventual adoption. These proposals received discussion by the faculties of the college and the professional schools, and were continuously refined and elaborated by the committee.

During the 1994-1995 academic year, the committee continued to meet with the college and professional school faculties, listened to the opinions of academic administrators and various interest groups, conducted monthly noontime discussions to which all faculty and staff were invited, and reported regularly to the faculty senate regarding the committee's continuing deliberations. In April, the senate adopted the proposed curriculum by a vote of 14-5. This vote seemed to be a generally accurate reflection of faculty opinion—substantial majority support, accompanied by significant minority opposition. After extended discussion, the president's committee (in June) and the board of trustees (in November) voted their approval without dissent.

### The Product

Reflecting La Sierra's long-standing emphases on intercultural awareness, the natural sciences, and student research, the new curriculum offers stu-





dents three options for their general education in the liberal arts: Track 1 is oriented toward international and multicultural interests; Track 2 is oriented toward mathematics and natural sciences; Track 3, which is still in the process of development and will incorporate a new version of the honors program, will be oriented toward original research. The tracks all involve the same amount of course work, which for most students will be slightly less than the previous requirements.

These options are intended also to address the intellectual interests of an increasingly diverse and heterogeneous student body, and to recognize individual differences among students resulting from multiple kinds of abilities and

intelligence. At the same time, all of the tracks are intended to expand the student's knowledge and skills well beyond the requirements of his or her major academic discipline and professional interests. The three tracks are explicitly independent of specific majors, professional requirements, and differences between bachelor of arts, bachelor of science, bachelor of music, and bachelor of social work curriculums. The criteria for choosing a particular track are therefore solely the individual student's own interests, abilities, and goals.

The core curriculum consists of a one-unit orientation seminar and seven four-unit interdisciplinary, multicultural, team-taught courses that explore

the meaning of humanness; the relationship between individuals and society; the multicultural American experience; the nature of religious experience; the meaning of Adventism; the nature and role of science; and the religious, moral, and social implications of the student's major discipline.

This core curriculum is the most innovative, significant, ambitious, and controversial component of the new program. It is innovative in how it combines interdisciplinary, multicultural, and religious education. It is significant because it is central to all three tracks and will therefore expose all undergraduate students to the multicultural realities of the La Sierra student population and regional environment and to the interdisciplinary and integrative nature of human life. The core is ambitious because interdisciplinary team-teaching is more difficult than single-subject solo teaching, and will require extensive in-service training. And it is controversial because its religious content is not so easily recognized as in traditional religion courses.

Vigorous discussion was generated by the fact that the traditional La Sierra requirement of four four-unit courses in religion was largely replaced by the religion content of the core curriculum. In response to the complaint that the new curriculum included too little study of religion, the committee explained that religion is a pervasive influence throughout the core curriculum, reflecting the long-standing Adventist tradition that

*Bible religion is not one influence among many others; its influence is to be supreme, pervading and controlling every other. It is not to be like a dash of color brushed here and there upon the canvas, but it is to pervade the whole life, as if the canvas were dipped into the color, until every thread of the fabric were dyed a deep, unfading hue.<sup>1</sup>*

The core curriculum was in fact designed to explore religious principles and values in the process of reflecting deeply on the various facets of human existence as a whole and of one's own personal, social, and vocational life. Thus, the committee insisted, the pro-

posed curriculum, rather than being deficient in religious content, would actually provide the most thoroughly and authentically Adventist general education anywhere.

### Community Service Component

An additional component of the core curriculum is a community-service practicum, in which all students will engage in supervised practical and/or professional activities related to specific courses, to curriculums, or to other university programs. This requirement is intended to help students realize that civic, political, and religious responsibility is not only an expression of moral

commitment, but also a contribution to the survival of a democratic society.

Beyond the core curriculum, students will take up to 32 units of course work in the various areas of academic learning—the humanities, the fine arts, the natural sciences and mathematics, the social sciences, and religion. A reduced version of the previous “distribution” or “cafeteria” approach to general education, this requirement supplements the core curriculum with a more traditional exposure to disciplines, and also provides students with some choice in the shape and content of their general education.

Finally, the new general-education

curriculum includes more rigorous competency requirements and outcome assessments of the fundamental skills necessary for a productive life in the world of the 21st century—English composition and research, mathematics, a non-English language, and health and fitness. Notably, for all graduates the new curriculum raises the required competency levels in mathematics and non-English language. Students who fail to pass a sophomore-level competency test in English composition must remedy their deficiencies.

### Some Observations

The old truism still holds: Revising

## THE CORE CURRICULUM

**T**he new integrated, interdisciplinary core curriculum at La Sierra University contains eight courses totalling 29 quarter units of credit. Beyond familiarizing students with important academic disciplines, it seeks to (1) expose them to intercultural, international, and interethnic concerns; (2) encourage them to develop a personal religious faith and a value system that will enable them to make moral decisions and informed choices; (3) stimulate them to adopt a principled and meaning-centered approach to life in the 21st century, and (4) equip them to participate effectively and responsibly in various intellectual, social, political, and religious endeavors in diverse cultural contexts.

The core courses, which will all be team-taught by faculty members from the college and the professional schools, are as follows:

- *Orientation Seminar* (1 unit)—introducing students to life at La Sierra, including the history and ethos of the university, the general-education curriculum, information technology, and effective learning strategies and skills.
- *The Idea of Being Human in Three Cultures* (4 units)—comparing and contrasting the changing ways in

which different peoples have conceived of human nature, including the life cycle from birth to death, issues of sex and gender, and the idea of being created “in the image of God.”

- *Individuals and Their Societies* (4 units)—exploring relationships among individuals, social groups, and institutions such as the government, the workplace, the school, the family, and the church, including the use of power and authority and the role of oral communication in building relationships and mediating disputes.

- *Cultures and Community in the United States* (4 units)—examining a culturally plural society deriving from Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia and united by the dominant values of politics (republicanism), economics (capitalism), and religion (morality and belief in God).

- *The Experience of Religion in Three Cultures* (4 units)—considering the phenomena of religious belief and experience, as well as the theologies and institutions that have been created to formalize doctrine, establish community, and ensure their perpetuation, comparing and contrasting Christianity and two other world religions.

- *Adventism in Global Perspective* (4 units)—looking at Adventism from

its inception in 19th century New England to its present situation as a multicultural community of faith, examining its major figures, distinguishing aspects, significant turning points, and current challenges.

- *Scientific Rationality in the Contemporary World* (4 units)—analyzing the nature of scientific knowledge, tracing the historical development of science in the Western world and its effect on non-Western cultures, and evaluating current issues in the relationship of science, culture, and religion.

- *Religious and Social Aspects of the Major Discipline* (4 units)—constituting a capstone to the general-education program and to each student's major program of studies, considering epistemological, moral, and social issues raised by the discipline.

Students will be expected to complete the first three of these courses during their freshman year, the next two during their sophomore year, and the last three during their junior and senior years. The academic transcripts of incoming transfer students will indicate which of the core courses they will be required to complete in order to receive a baccalaureate degree.

a college curriculum is about as easy as moving a graveyard. The struggle is inevitable: Faculty and departments that have for many years devoted time and energy (and sometimes prayers and tears) developing and improving particular courses they think are helpful to general students will be understandably disturbed that these courses are being replaced. At best, it means constructing new courses; at worst, it seems to threaten the meaning and value of one's professional life. The difficulty of curricular change inhibits change; and the resulting lack of experience with change makes things even more difficult.

Re-visioning and revising general education is itself an educational process—for those most directly involved (the general-education committee), for faculty, for administrators, and for trustees. Fortunately, all of these groups are generally educable. Here, in conclusion and for the benefit of others who may be contemplating a similar curricular adventure, are several things we have learned (and sometimes re-learned) about the process and its participants (including ourselves):

- *Higher education moves very slowly.* It takes far longer to make major changes in a general-education curriculum than anyone expects. If the whole process bears actual fruit within a decade, everyone involved should be pleased. In a larger sense, of course, the process is never actually finished; the dynamic nature of human societies calls for a continuing review and periodic re-visioning and re-forming of the curriculum.

- *Patience is essential, not only to avoid frustration because of the slowness of the process, but also to avoid the mistake of demanding a decision before the campus community as a whole is ready.* No matter how good the proposal, if it is an idea whose time has not yet come, it will not be accepted. The best time to seek approval is when most of the voters in any particular group (faculty, administrators, trustees) are a little tired of the whole debate.

- *No matter how well or how often a*

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*committee communicates its plans to various internal and external constituencies, it will not be enough for those who dislike the proposal. They will always complain that it was "railroaded," the process was "flawed," and the subject "needed more discussion."* So the best strategy is to communicate well and often—but not forever.

- *Church officials are not always experts in religious education, to say nothing of higher education in general.* It is therefore helpful to educate them as thoroughly as possible about the goals and methods of higher education so they can contribute positively to the decision-making process.

- *No matter how much everyone agrees with the need for curricular change, and likes the philosophy and general shape of a proposal, the turf warriors will eventually have their day.* But they will argue not on behalf of their turf but on behalf of some transcendent good such as "historic Adventist values" or "biblical principles." Therefore, if the proposal is to be approved, it must be advocated on the

basis of its own moral vision. Nothing else will overcome the resistance of vested "spiritual" interests.

- *Administrative support is indispensable; and it must be solid, evident, and consistent.* Because curricular change is always distressing to someone, often in direct proportion to the amount of disruption anticipated, actually effecting change requires administrative courage and fortitude.

- *It cannot be assumed that intellectual rigor is highly valued, or that an attempt to raise academic standards will be enthusiastically endorsed.* On the contrary, such an endeavor may be perceived as threatening and labeled "elitist." One of the continuing challenges of Adventist higher education is balancing egalitarianism, which offers a college opportunity to everyone who wants it regardless of prior academic performance or future educational prospects, with the best educational experience for the most qualified students. Both points of view can (and do) cite the Adventist conviction that "higher than the highest human thought can reach is God's ideal for His children."<sup>2</sup>

Yet, however it is applied, this conviction remains foundational for education at La Sierra. It is the most basic motivation for re-visioning and re-forming general education. The project is a major challenge, a long and difficult task; but it is eminently worth doing. Our students deserve it, and our institutional identity and integrity demand it. ☛

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