

UC Merced

AIARU: Panel 3 - General Education and the Research University

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**Academic Innovation and the American Research University
Symposium**

University of California, Merced
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Panel #3: General Education and the Research University

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**UCLA CHANCELLOR
GENE BLOCK PH.D.**

Now we realize its getting late and we want to have some time for questions but we have three panelists who would like to just comment upon the other, the other conversations that are going on as well as the presentations this morning. So I'll first ask, I think, Professor [Peggy] O'Day to make some comments.

**UC MERCED
PROFESSOR OF
EARTH SCIENCES,
PEGGY O'DAY
PH.D.**

I'd like to, I'd like to make a couple of comments that kind of amplify some earlier comments as well as maybe make a couple of new points that haven't been brought up yet. I think first I'd like to sort of recast this a little bit in terms of talking broadly about education in general and not just general education. What is it that students come to a university for in terms of higher education? And I think we can sort of just break that down broadly into what people have been talking about in terms of breadth that a liberal arts or undergraduate education has a component of breadth, which is sometimes within GE [General Education] and sometimes it isn't. There's the depth, which is generally the major topic. So students are expected to learn some set of more specialized skills. To what depth that might occur is a very good question and I think that's part of the tension that's

been already discussed. And the third component that's also been mentioned are skills. And I think that that category of skills can take a very broad range. Everything from learning how to run an Excel spreadsheet to perhaps maybe something more important such as assimilation of diverse data, critical thinking, the ability to problem solve, and to use data to build your critical thinking skills and to solve your problems.

So, so how does general education courses, or breadth courses maybe if we want to consider it that way, how does that actually contribute within those areas? I think one of the flaws of general education has been that we typically pull it out and we take it somewhere else and we say, "This is another category of learning," and we give the list to the students and they have to check the boxes and they're done. I think that it would be more profitable for us to think about how breadth courses, or general education courses, can fill the gaps in a student's education.

So part of that rethinking involves the majors themselves deciding as [UC Davis Chancellor] Linda [Katehi] was mentioning, the majors themselves deciding that maybe their students need some skills that they are not going to deliver just from their major perspective alone. And I think that's something we've tried to do in our core courses to some extent, to be able to emphasize the integrative part of learning. And this was something that was discussed at length in a couple of committees on general education that we've had here, that something of real value that centralized courses can bring is this, this integrative interdisciplinary component and the ability to think about problems in a different way, maybe from a different perspective and perhaps with a group of students that students would not normally interact with once they're within their major.

So I think another important component is

exposing students to the idea of problem solving within perhaps, a group of people that are diverse, both in terms of cultural diversity but also in terms of disciplinary diversity. And maybe this is something for something like the engineers, there's a lot of teamwork that goes on in all sorts of disciplines now where you have to learn how to work in an interdisciplinary mode, you have to learn how to work with a group of people. That's something that we've wanted to instill more of in our own general education program and I think we've run into some limitations in terms of our resources and ability to do that. But perhaps if we can rethink some of our breadth or GE courses as really components that contribute to majors, that contribute to the overall student education, that there isn't going to be so much of this separate idea.

Now part of that implementation really requires that faculty to some extent, and administration to some extent, have a change of their mindset. That, that the acceptance is that general education and breadth courses are a part of every major. And that means that every major needs to contribute to those in some ways. It isn't something that you say, "Oh, go over there and take your GenEd." It's that all of the majors are thinking about how general education courses and breadth courses, as well as perhaps some skill courses like writing, are part of their major. So, I think that's the first suggestion that I would make for our campus. From both the administrative and the faculty point of view is that we need to really think about how it's integrated into every major.

The other big topic that people have alluded to but is always the hard one to talk about is how do you do this in a resource-limited world, particularly now as our campus is facing growth, we're facing limited resources and we have these great ideas about how to do these innovative courses and how do we do this on a limited budget? That's a hard

one. I think one is, first of all, that if we don't separate general education from our majors, if we realize that it is part of every major, that we're now thinking about how our faculty are going to contribute to that. It's not that there's a separate FTE [full-time equivalent] pot over here that, that is for GenEd. If we integrate that into our majors then I think we can make arguments that, well we need faculty who are going to contribute to that, to general education as well as to our majors.

Another suggestion, and this might seem a little strange, but another suggestion is I think that we really need to bring our graduate students into the breadth courses and into general education courses. If we think about the continuum of learning between undergraduate education and graduate education, and I mean that across the board, not just in social science or humanities but in engineering and sciences as well, part of the student training for graduate students, part of making the next generation of faculty is that these faculty need to be able to teach in different environments, they need to be able to teach in interdisciplinary courses, and they need to be able to integrate; the same skills that we're trying to teach the undergrads. So I think we need to bring the graduate students into that process as instructors, as teaching assistants, and perhaps maybe use them more fully to give undergraduates a more one-on-one experience. So one can imagine in addition to perhaps big, centralized courses like our core courses, our graduate students would be great vehicles for doing freshman seminars, smaller group study courses, more of that individualized attention which is another important component of general education.

So maybe that's another thing that we could think about here in terms of resourcing GE. So, to close I just want to echo the, some of the sentiment that's already been expressed here, that general education and curriculum evolution is never done,

and I think we really need to think about it that way, that, that our general education component of our curriculum is something that continues to evolve, it's going to always evolve and I think we should look at that as an opportunity and not a limitation. Thanks. [*applause*]