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Panel #3: General Education and the Research University

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I'm going to speak to in part what the vision is, we all know that there are problems with implementation. But the vision is very important, at least it was to me when I was looking at this university and chose to move here. The GE [General Education] program is remarkably simple compared to many GE programs. At a lot of universities you have lists of courses you have to take, it's a Chinese menu kind of thing and if you're getting one from this column you have to get one from that column but if you get one A then you got to do two C. And they're just outrageously complicated. And if you've ever been in the committees that put those together, you know that its really like making laws and sausages and has little to do with education and a lot to do with FTEs [full-time equivalent]. We don't have that here. We have a Core 100 course in the junior year, ostensibly following on the Core 1 course in the freshman year. The Core 1 course and the Core 100 course originally had the same title, "The World at Home." The first one is very much a students are being exposed to, through lecture for the most part, from faculty, a whole bunch of different disciplines as ways of looking at some common problems and questions. And then the Core 100

was supposed to be a kind of follow-up to have students actually do projects on some of those questions and problems so they would have had more experience learning, both generally and specifically, over their freshman and sophomore years to come back to that. And we haven't been able fund that second piece of it.

The other components of general education here are a couple of building block courses, a writing course and a math course. There are school differences about how much mathematics, but nonetheless these two basic categories are there. And then there's a kind of a breadth component and every one of our schools has not a list of courses that count, but a general direction that students must take courses in the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities and arts. Humanities and arts get lumped together, I'm not sure that's appropriate but it says something about the bias of the campus. The fact that I'm the only humanist and there are no artists on any of the three panels says something too.

It's not the usual menu, pretty much anything counts as long as its outside of the area for your major and it's distributed over those other major areas. Now, I assume there are certain implications of this that are very important. The first is that research and inquiry are not just in the sciences, that complex problems are social and they therefore entail ethical, aesthetic, political, and historical dimensions. But you can't solve these problems alone. And that seems to be what we're hearing from our other panelists. You were talking about engineers not having certain kinds of, of knowledge. A few years back I was reading some scholarship in teaching and medicine about how physicians can't really interpret patients' needs because they don't have a sense of the nuance of language and they cut off patients' stories. So they started teaching medical students to read poetry so they could get the nuance of language and read

narratives so they could understand how a story conveys something. And I'm thinking, "Hey! Take an English class!" [*waves arms around*] [*laughter*]

When I was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, briefly med schools all did say, "Every student must have a letter of recommendation from an English professor." So I started getting all these pre-med students in my 120 student lecture classes and they'd all be in the back of the room. Two years later they'd come up and say, "Can you write me a letter of recommendation for medical school?" Don't think that's really what they had in mind. [UC] President [Mark] Yudof this morning was talking about demography as destiny. Well, again as a humanist I can think of other models; demography is powerful but so are ideas.

It would be nice if our electorate were educated so that even if most of the voters were old they would see a, an interest in the common interest. My grandmother used to do that; she used to say, "When people didn't want to raise taxes for education I'd ask them, 'Why? Do they want all those other people's kids to be barbarians?'" Or as Mark Twain put it, "Every time you stop a school, you will have to build a jail. What you gain at one end you lose at the other. It's like feeding a dog on its own tail; it won't fatten that dog." [*laughter*] And I think we see that in the United States and California in particular. Our prison budgets are booming and our education budgets are collapsing. And that's true in state, after state, after state.

Well, what happened? Why did our booming higher education industry not teach all those future voters about the common good? I think there's something of a failure of general education that we have seen and what this curriculum tries to do is feed those things together by that essential structure. The fact that we come back to Core 100, the same kind of ideas with a different pedagogical approach

suggests that general education is not simply a building block, a set of building blocks. If you look at the articulations between community colleges, Cal States,and University of California there's the assumption that through IGETC [Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum] that you get this stuff out of the way and its a foundation and then the real learning happens on top of it. We say no. We say these things have to come back, you have to keep integrating them. These complex social problems can't be done in a really hierarchical way. Every school requires also upper division GE courses, which is unusual in the UC system if my colleagues on USEP [University Committee on Educational Policy] are telling the truth.

So GE is not simply a building block. General Education is necessary to find and understand sites of interdisciplinary interest, to have and know broadly in order to know which tool to use. Again, talking about medicine, when my son was having tremendous difficulty in school, a psychiatrist diagnosed him as having ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder]. And a psychologist friend of ours said, "Well, of course, to a hammer the world looks like a nail." And that was I thought a really interesting way to put it. When we're stuck in, when we have one tool kit and we try to solve all problems with one tool kit we don't solve them. We need the expertise of others but, most importantly, you need to know when you need the expertise of others. And that's what general education is supposedly about. So you need this kind of recursive nature. You need to keep feeding back knowledge. One of the things and skills, especially skills, one of the things that our seniors last year said in their exit interviews is they didn't get Core 100 until later. That now they get it. And some people say, "Oh, well, that's a problem. We didn't effectively teach them or we taught them too soon." I think that's faulty. I think that the point is, you have to begin in confusion, you have to stretch people's minds. They

are not going to get it the first time around; you've got to make it so it comes back. And this is what Christopher [Viney] was talking about, about having assignments in every discipline that keep drawing on that set of skills so you don't have professors saying, "Well it was terribly written but you got the math right so its an A." Or you got the biology right, or what have you. That every one of us is going to be responsive to these broader needs.

Now, we all know we've been unable to fund Core 100, which is a damn shame because it's a great idea. And we may have to adapt and by the time we've adapted it's probably going to be outdated and all those things are, are true here already. But I also think that we need to understand this in a very different context then we've talked about. We've talked about history right now, earlier we talked about competition from other American universities and international universities. It seems to me that the real competition is the internet. That universities have always been able to sustain themselves because they were the gatekeepers and the gate. The library was where all the stuff was; you had to go to the university to get the knowledge. So we could be really lax. We could just teach some "stuff." You had to come to us and pay it. Now we have to teach people how to use knowledge. We have to teach people how to sort the good stuff, from the bad stuff. We have to teach people how to negotiate the sea of information that they have immediate access to. And it seems to me the skills of a liberal education, or if we want to call them general education, are the fundamental skills that we need to be able to put that together.

The other thing that I think that's really crucial about the implications of this GE model or what Hans [Björnsson] was saying earlier, that if we think of ourselves as scholars, as learners and our students as learners, we flatten hierarchies; we invite them in, we see the different perspectives

they bring to bear can actually feed our own scholarship. That it's a, this is something that Prith Banerjee was saying this morning in industry, that flattening hierarchies makes organizations more nimble, especially in knowledge industries. And we have a very hierarchical system. And I think it's important that if faculty see general education as much more team based and we are learning from our peers and our students and our students are learning from us and from their peers, that it's a complex interaction, then we are giving them the skills that they are going to need to take their specialized education and make it into a usable education down the road. And one hopes also, to be good enough citizens to keep funding universities. [*laughter*]