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U.S. Public Higher Education, General Education, and the Medievalist

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U.S. Public Higher Education, General Education, and the Medievalist

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Abstract

Kline's essay guides readers through the steps many Chaucerians may find themselves taking in order to protect the English major and to ensure medieval literature remains in higher education curriculum. In institutions such as the University of Alaska-Anchorage, where funding has dried up and what remains is frequently diverted to STEM fields, one certain way to preserve the major is through faculty's active involvement in curricular work and general education. The goal cannot be simply to pack as many medieval-literature-friendly courses into the curriculum as possible; instead, the goal is to create coherent general education programs that meet student needs *and* provide opportunities for them to explore the questions that medieval literary texts provoke. Although it might seem outside the medievalist's immediate interests, active participation in shared governance provides a means for medievalists to remain relevant.

My message to New Chaucer Society members and other medievalists in the United States is simple: contributing to your campus's unheralded work of teaching General Education courses and engaging in shared governance service might be the best ways to save your major and generate interest in your field. For those not familiar with baccalaureate programs in the U.S., the 120-credit degree comprises three roughly equal parts: the major, electives (or a minor), and General Education (often called "the core" or simply "GenEd"). GenEd's lower-division courses have two primary purposes: to prepare students with major-ready skills (written communication, oral communication, and math) and to provide students a wide range of other courses in the liberal arts and sciences (the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, and the fine arts). Undergirding these purposes is the civic ideal that GenEd fosters critical thinkers and educated, well-informed citizens. For faculty, GenEd classes provide opportunities to affect positive change because the students in these courses are often looking for something that excites them, something beyond just getting a good job, even as they meet a degree requirement. Remembering this link between GenEd and recruitment into the major is essential to keeping our programs alive and vibrant because "student demand" can keep programs alive when the budget axe comes. While you and I might understand the absolute necessity of the humanities, an argument relying on a discipline's intrinsic value does not convince administrators and Boards of Regents [BORs] to continue funding when the budget has to be cut, especially when other programs (like the professional programs in STEM, health sciences, and business) draw more students. Each of us must not only actively recruit and retain students but also do the hard service—the curricular and institutional work—that provides real help and real solutions. Otherwise, our programs, our departments, and our jobs will remain in trouble. To put it into the narrowest economic terms of supply and demand (which is how many administrators and BORs think), GenEd courses are the most reliable means for attracting students into the English major and our courses in medieval literature. We must attend to GenEd if we expect our profession to thrive. Rather than the burden that so many believe, teaching GenEd is a privilege and necessity if our programs are to survive, and in my experience, shared governance finds its best expression in curriculum work.

Why Must Medievalists Take General Education Seriously?

I come to these conclusions as someone who has taught entry-level courses from the beginning of my career. Unlike many medievalists, I was never a TA or an RA, and I didn't take a traditional route through graduate school to the Ph.D. I started as an adjunct teaching two courses each term at three institutions before I landed a full-time position at Jefferson Community College in Louisville, KY, while I worked on my Ph.D. at Indiana University in Bloomington. I taught a 4/4 load at JCC (usually four sections of composition) with all the service requirements—especially advising—and gained tenure the year before I finished the doctorate in 1997. University of Alaska-Anchorage hired me because they wanted a Chaucerian who could teach composition and invigorate the earlier British literature offerings. Even my own undergraduate experience underscores why I hold GenEd courses as essential to the individual student experience and to the health of our field. A physics major, I took a required General Education literature sequence at a STEM-heavy school. Though always a reader and arts lover, I was transfixed by reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and I switched to double major in English and History. (My dad was not happy.) As a result of these experiences, I've always

had a real commitment to lower-division teaching and GenEd, and this commitment has informed most of my institutional work at UAA. Unlike many mid-tier regional universities, UAA is not only open enrollment. We are open access: We take everyone, no matter their preparation.

Despite its importance to the intellectual vigor of individual students, subfields, departments, and universities—and never mind its function in creating an educated citizenry—GenEd is minimized on many campuses, especially those with a predominance of professional programs, and it is denigrated by many faculty as “service courses” and given to adjuncts. Too often, faculty fail to see how GenEd courses can contribute to their program’s vitality and viability. As a result, many schools cobble together GenEd curriculum that only provides lip service to the concept. For instance, when I began working on GenEd at UAA, I was just dumbfounded that our General Education Requirements [GER], which affect every student and every major, lacked any real coherence. Like many institutions, we have an *a la carte* menu of GenEd courses: take two courses from Written Communication, one from Oral Communication, and so on. And as elsewhere, GenEd at UAA had too often been about departmental market share instead of pedagogical necessity. Courses were added to fit niche demands of particular programs. For example, UAA’s College of Engineering and its College of Business and Public Policy required their students to take the English Department’s 200-level technical writing course (and not just any 200-level writing course). So, any student who had not taken the correct 200-level composition course was in effect penalized if they wanted to major in Engineering or Business. Without a clear purpose, UAA’s GER had become by 2015 enormous, unfocused, and expensive, flaws that could be ignored as long as the state was awash in oil money. Once that oil money evaporated, every course had to be justified. Having an essential role within GenEd was one way for a course to make that claim.

We had already begun in the early 2000s this process of rethinking the GenEd’s purpose at UAA. Around that time, I took a leadership role in GenEd after my department chair asked me to serve on the Undergraduate Academic Board, which reviews all university curriculum before it goes to the Faculty Senate for endorsement and the Provost’s office for approval. The institution realized we needed to define clear goals for both students and the program. We began by articulating a structure and defining Student Learning Outcomes [SLOs] for the seven GER categories. (See figure 1.) Though it had its flaws, this format gave department opportunities to offer lower-division courses fulfilling Tiers 1, 2, and 3 requirements. For instance, in addition to my major courses with a medieval or theoretical focus, I made certain to include significant doses of pre-modern texts in my GenEd courses (a 100-level Intro to Literature, a 200-level World Lit I, and a 300-level Brit Lit I) so that students would have a taste of medieval and ancient texts. And though the English Department offered our History of the Language course for its Tier 3 the Integrative Capstone—a course taught only by linguists which didn’t afford me the chance to teach an explicitly medieval course for the capstone—the capstone did by its nature include medieval content. Moreover, I incorporated the goals and outcomes of the Integrative Capstone in my upper-division courses because I knew it would create a more holistic experience for my students.

UAA GERs: 3 Tiers, 7 Categories, 9 Outcomes

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>1. Tier 1: Basic Skills (12)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written Comm (6 cr) • Oral Comm (3 cr) • Quantitative Skills (3 cr) <p>2. Tier 2: Disciplinary Knowledge (22)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural Sciences (7 cr) • Social Sciences (6 cr) • Humanities (6 cr) • Fine Arts (3 cr) <p>3. Tier 3: Integrative Capstone (3)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meets GER in the major • Integration of Tier 1 in major | <p><i>After completing the GERs, UAA students shall be able to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate effectively in a variety of contexts and formats. • Reason mathematically and analyze quantitative and qualitative data competently to reach sound conclusions. • Relate knowledge to the historical context in which it developed and the human problems it addresses. • Interpret different systems of aesthetic representation and understand their historical and cultural contexts. • Investigate the complexity of human institutions and behavior to better understand interpersonal, group and cultural dynamics. • Identify ways in which science has advanced the understanding of important natural processes. • Locate and use relevant information to make appropriate personal and professional decisions. • Adopt critical perspectives for understanding the forces of globalization and diversity. • Integrate knowledge and employ skills gained to synthesize creative thinking, critical judgment and personal experience in a meaningful and coherent manner. |
|---|---|

Fig. 1 The current structure of UAA's General Education Requirements

The Perils (and Limits) of Disciplinarity

Although I am arguing that we must take advantage of the opportunities that GenEd provides us, I am not arguing that we should jury-rig the system to obtain short-sighted benefit for individual departments. As I learned while department chair, such narrow goals can hinder rather than help students, and they don't necessarily inoculate a department against cuts. So, when courses were added without regard for their fit into the GER but simply to meet a specific department's needs, when departments added prerequisites in the name of academic rigor, or when departments limited students in their major to a specific subset of GER courses, students faced unnecessary delays easily blamed on our unwieldy GER. Little systematic thought was given to how the GER courses added up at UAA, and basically we let a thousand flowers bloom because it was simpler that way.

Eventually, data revealed that we had misunderstood our students' view of the GER. Faculty believed that students wanted greater variety; students actually wanted better efficiency. In 2015, UAA had 256 courses fulfilling the seven GER category requirements. The GER in total generated 43% of all Student Credit Hours [SCH] at UAA (152,953 SCH in 2015). None of that was a surprise. We were, however, surprised to learn that only seven courses—including Introduction to Composition, Technical Writing, College Algebra, General Psychology, and Anatomy & Physiology I—comprised a quarter of the university's SCH each semester. Just thirty GER courses accounted for 60% of the GER enrollment and 12% of UAA's total SCH; the other 226 GER courses accounted for only 40% of GER enrollment. As the saying goes, "Students were voting with their feet," and too many GER courses, designed primarily to meet individual departmental needs or faculty preferences, cost far more to teach than the tuition they generated. This is the hard truth: Student Credit Hours equal income. If a course (or a department) costs more than it generates, it becomes a target when budgets are shrinking. UAA's English department knows this first hand.

That was the situation we faced when I became UAA's first Director of General Education in 2015. Since then, we've found several ways to address these GER problems institutionally with an institution-wide Student Success initiative. First, we minimized developmental courses and placed students in college-level courses whenever possible with additional supports. Getting underprepared students over these hurdles requires working cooperatively and creatively across programs by providing supplemental instruction, peer tutoring, corequisites, stretch- and block-course offerings, and math and writing labs. Second, First-Year Advising is now mandatory, and we use data to place underprepared students in specific clusters of courses that allow them to develop important skills at the same time as they accumulate credits toward graduation. With this data-informed placement and mandatory advising, we have raised our six-year graduation rate (the national standard) by seven points in just two years. Third, by thinking of our students as belonging to the entire university and not just a major, we're doing a better job in finding the key themes connecting courses, the best combination of courses for different kinds of students, and better articulation between the GenEd and the programs and majors, processes requiring lots of patience, many meetings, and careful coordination across multiple campuses and programs. It's important to understand that being meaningfully involved in governance often offers the chance to work across many venues, and although this service work is neither glamorous nor high-profile, it is absolutely essential if literary studies is to remain viable and if medieval studies is to maintain a place in the curriculum that is increasingly biased toward the contemporary era.

The stakes were raised significantly when the BOR decided to align General Education Requirements across the three Alaskan universities (and their associated community campuses) in 2015.¹ I was already Chair of English when I volunteered to head the BOR Task Force on GER Alignment of Tier 1 skills (oral, written, and quantitative). I figured since I was going to work on the GER at UAA, I might as well jump into the alignment process so that I could reconcile the system-wide discussions with what needed to happen at UAA and in the English department. I might even be able to help redirect the discussions in the face of BOR overreach. However, to get a group of faculty from three different campuses to agree—each with their own approach to GenEd and their own campus priorities on the line—was a bit of a nightmare. As a result, we spent too much time fussing over unimportant details rather than addressing the BOR's mandate to align prefixes, course numbers, descriptions, and outcomes as directly as possible. Over and over my colleagues declared

¹ In part, we are dealing with “the Alaska factor.” Until fairly recently, Alaska students have been place-bound, and the UAA system comprises the Anchorage campus, Matanuska-Susitna College (Palmer), Kenai Peninsula College (Soldotna), Prince William Sound College (Valdez), and Kodiak College (on Kodiak Island). The distances are vast just within the UAA service area, the travel extremely expensive (if not impossible), and the communities and educational needs in each area unique. It is 400 miles from Anchorage to Kodiak (which requires either a boat or plane); Anchorage to Valdez is a 300-mile drive that is often impassible during the winter; and Palmer and Soldotna had only dangerous two-lane corridors until recently. In fact, there are more paved miles of road in King County, Washington (where Seattle is located) than there is *in the entire state of Alaska*, and about 90% of Alaska's approximately 700,000 people live along the “rail belt” from Seward in South-Central Alaska to Fairbanks in the Interior. The rest of Alaska is accessible only by plane or boat in the summers and plane or snow machine (*not* snow mobile) during the winter. In fact, it is nearly *1,300 miles* from the Alaska system's northernmost campus in Kotzebue on the Chukchi Sea in the north to Ketchikan in the south. Apart from the Alaska campuses, there are only two other regionally accredited institutions in the entire state: Alaska Pacific University in Anchorage and Utqiagvik College (a two-year school) in Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow) on the Beaufort Sea. In other words, students just can't commute to Anchorage to complete their four-year degrees, nor does rural Alaska have stable internet. However, these practical realities disappear from the vantage point of an Excel spreadsheet detailing costs, an administrative org-chart, or a BOR matrix delegating responsibilities to different units or campuses.

that “faculty control the curriculum.” That is true, in a sense, but if the administration cuts your program or if the BOR deletes your major, there’s no curriculum to control and no faculty to teach it. I think many faculty members believe that Board actions are too far removed to affect them. Unfortunately, that is not the case, and I believe we will see even greater intrusion into traditional faculty matters by activist Boards of Regents in the coming years. The best strategy is to engage proactively in student-focused initiatives through governance and other processes rather than reactively defend traditional structures and processes.

These efforts have not been enough to fight the forces working against English studies in general and medieval literature in particular. Already, the UAA English department’s revised curriculum had minimized pre-modern literature. Our gateway World Literature survey has been reduced to a single semester, and a student can now get through the program with little or nothing prior to Shakespeare. More significantly, for the past five years, it’s been clear at UAA that maintaining or even increasing enrollment in English and other areas was an administrative priority. We did not rise to the challenge as we might have. So, after an exhaustive, year-long Expedited Program Review process in which each major and program was given the chance to make its best case, on June 5-6, 2020, the Alaska Board of Regents voted “to delete” UAA’s MA in English and the MFA in Creative Writing as well as its programs in Sociology, Theater & Dance, Environment & Science, and programs. Alaska will now be the only state without a Sociology degree. For the English Department, the cuts meant losing three full-time, tenure-track positions, reducing our staff from 9 FT TT faculty members after next year. (When I started UAA in 1997, we had 22 FT TT faculty.) Our terrific little MA program, which culminated in a substantive, single, article-length essay with a specific journal as the audience, graduated 30-35 students in the last ten years. Everyone who applied to Ph.D. programs got into one of their top choices (with funding), and of those 15 MA graduates at least 5 are now in full-time positions. Our low-residency MFA program drew from across the country, and hundreds of people visit Alaska every year because they’ve read books by Dana Stabenow, Rich Chiappone, Joann Mapson, Don Reardon, Sherry Simpson, David Stevenson, Nancy Lord, and others. All gone. Someone should be able to know how to demonstrate the economic impact of such things, but we weren’t able to.

The English department is highly diminished, almost crippled, and it appears that there is a move to combine Ph.D. faculty from different campuses into single departments. Then, all courses would be online or synchronous hybrid courses where local students in Anchorage would be face-to-face and students across the state would Zoom in. It’s certainly not ideal, but if done correctly, it could work, and it would certainly be better than having no English major at all. The BOR has made it clear that it is not averse to eliminating Sociology and Theater at UAA and other programs across the state, so that has put all non-STEM programs with “weak” enrollments on notice.

Collaborating Across Campuses and Disciplines

Throughout these financial pressures and systemic changes, UAA continued to refine our General Education, and the greatest benefits have come from the new, inclusive processes we have developed. By taking a more deliberate and iterative approach centered around assessment, driven by accreditation requirements, and focused on collaborative faculty work coming from bottom-up rather than top-down, we found the greatest value came from the conversations and shared understandings diverse sets of faculty were able to achieve concerning GenEd. Our approach—recognized by the Association

of American College and Universities [AAC&U] and by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities [NWCCU] as a nationally innovative approach to GenEd assessment—invited *anyone* from *any* part of the campus or program to contribute to the assessment of *any* GER. Moreover, using the AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics as a starting point when they were pertinent, we assessed the GenEd outcomes across the entire curriculum, rather than just in the GER courses. Five years later, collective assessment has become our standard approach because it gives us a common language for discussing what we value, why it was important, and how we could work together for students. Too often, when faculty hear about assessment, they think about numbers. At UAA, assessment has created *shared* intellectually stimulating and pedagogically creative conversations to help us rethink our courses and programs for our diverse student body.

At the same time, while assessment gave us a common language for talking about these important curricular and classroom issues across the campuses, we took on two additional initiatives that have reshaped the UAA GenEd. The first was our Alaska Native Themed (AKNT) GER initiative (2015-18)—a statewide process that UAA rolled out first—and the second was the Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) GER initiative, a UAA-only effort (2017-20). Both of these bubbled up from the students, first of all, and then through important faculty working groups. When a new institutional priority is identified, the tradition has been to “add another GER course,” but I knew this outmoded approach would not be feasible, so I worked first with the statewide Alaska Native Studies Council and then the Faculty Senate Diversity Committee with three tasks:

1. To develop a set of four simple, high-level, broad-based Student Learning Outcomes for AKNT and D&I.
2. To identify a slate of currently existing courses that already addressed at least three of the four AKNT or D&I SLOs.
3. To vet the SLOs and courses with the individual departments before faculty sent the repurposed courses through the curriculum review process.

It was my responsibility then to shepherd the entire operation from start to finish, from the initial proposal and development of the SLOs, through the faculty review and curriculum process, and then finally through any discussion or revision to approval by the Provost and inclusion in the catalog. Each time it took about three years from start to finish, involved dozens of faculty members, and incorporated multiple campuses. The primary reason why we were able to develop these GenEd initiatives is that they are defined by SLOs rather than by content, so instead of departments thinking they would be cut out of the opportunity to offer pertinent courses—like the traditional model of requiring all students to take a single, say, Anthropology course for the AKNT or a Sociology course for D&I (and thereby crowding out other opportunities)—any department could submit a course that meets the outcomes. (See figure 2.) Because we developed generalized, high-level language under which any department could find room, GenEd revision has become an opportunity for creativity rather than a battle for market share. Neither Alaska Native interests nor those of Diversity & Inclusion are subsumed beneath the other, and that is vitally important politically. Now, all programs can have a stake in GenEd, rather than it being limited to just a few departments, and we’ve reached a really interesting moment in which *General Education* is a mark of a UAA student’s distinctiveness!

| Alaska Native Themed GER (Effective Fall 2018 for newly enrolled students) | Diversity & Inclusion GER (Effective Fall 2018 for newly enrolled students) |
|---|--|
| <p>The Alaska Native-Themed GER addresses UAA's mission to serve 'the higher education needs of the state, its communities, and its diverse peoples'. It also recognizes UAA's unique location on the ancestral homelands of the Dena'ina Athabascan, Ahtna Athabascan, Alutiiq/Sugpiak, and Eyak peoples, and the 20 Alaska Native languages that are now official languages of the State of Alaska.</p> | <p>The Diversity and Inclusion GER initiative addresses UAA's mission to serve 'the higher education needs of the state, its communities, and its diverse peoples.' UAA honors diverse experiences and perspectives—including differences in ideas, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, culture, nationality, age, disability, veteran, and socioeconomic status—and strives to create welcoming and inclusive learning environments where all are treated with respect. Diversity maximizes our potential for creativity, innovation, educational excellence, and outstanding service to our communities.</p> |
| <p><i>After completing the Alaska Native-Themed GER, UAA students shall be able to:</i></p> | <p><i>After completing the Diversity and Inclusion GER, UAA students shall be able to:</i></p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize Alaska Native/Indigenous diversity by tribe, language and region. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate an understanding of the complex elements important to their own culture and/or socially defined groups in relation to their history, values, beliefs, and/or practices. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and articulate the complexity and sophistication of Alaska Native/Indigenous knowledge systems and social institutions and the arts in historical and contemporary contexts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze differences among cultures and socially-defined groups in relation to their history, values, beliefs, and/or practices. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulate the social and legal development of Alaska Native peoples, such as ANCSA. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate power, privilege, and equity with regards to their own culture and socially defined group compared with others. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the historical forces of colonization and their impact upon Alaska Native regions, communities, and individuals. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply knowledge and skills from a particular academic discipline as it relates to issues of cultural specificity and diversity. |

Fig 2. UAA’s Alaska Native Themed and Diversity & Inclusion GenEd Requirements

The next several years will see us aligning GenEd assessment with the Core Competencies assessment required by the NWCCU, and we just finished a year-long process to identify our institutional Core Competencies, which map nicely to the GenEd. (See figure 3.)

| General Education (curricular areas) | | Core Competencies (broad institutional objectives) |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Written Communication | Tier 1 Integral Skills | Effective Communication |
| Oral Communication | | |
| Information Literacy | | |
| Creative & Critical Thinking | | |
| Quantitative Literacy | | |
| Natural Sciences + Lab | Tier 2 Disciplinary Knowledge | Creative & Critical Thinking |
| Social Sciences | | Intercultural Fluency |
| Humanities | | Personal, Professional, and Community Responsibility |
| Fine Arts | | |
| Knowledge Integration | Tier 3 Integrative Capstone | |
| Alaska Native Requirement | | |
| Diversity & Inclusion Requirement | | |

Fig 3. Aligning UAA GenEd and Institutional Core Competencies

So, now my task over the next few years is four-fold (so far): (1) “Map” the GenEd to the Core Competencies, (2) Facilitate an assessment process for the core competencies, (3) Simplify GenEd assessment to complement the core competency process, and (4) “Close the loop” or develop regular mechanisms to take what we’ve learned in assessment to develop more effective curriculum and pedagogy. And—of course—be ready to respond proactively to whatever exigency arises in the continuing budget crisis and online pivot driven by COVID-19. If I were to guess, I’d say that we’re going to need to streamline the GenEd and simplify the structure to survive the budget crisis. As long as we can keep faculty at the center of that process, ultimately it will be okay. If not, there are plenty of online vendors who will jump at the chance to do it for us. Even worse, I’ve heard more than one regent suggest out-sourcing developmental education, composition, and math to one of the big online outfits like the University of Phoenix, Western Governors, or Arizona State. That would certainly solve the money problem, but faculty and ultimately students and then the entire state would be the losers. The programs that have flourished at UAA are those who took the risk to revise their programs

in light of the new fiscal realities, creating better courses shaped by research-informed practices, rather than fighting to remain in their current configurations. By becoming involved in curriculum work where shared governance is its most intimate, faculty can create greater opportunities for their programs even when faced with institutional contraction.

The Responsibilities of Shared Governance

Here's a hard truth that I've learned: active and sustained engagement through shared governance is the best way to save our programs and serve our students. When the institution is motoring along fairly smoothly, I've repeatedly seen colleagues ignore opportunities to engage in the dreary work of shared governance, dismissing it as wasted time (which it can be). They fail to realize that to make substantive change, we have to be in position to do so. We get there by developing relationships with the administrators and offering input about long-term, routine matters. Then, when a decision needs to be made, a problem needs to be solved—*now*—administrators respect the faculty's habit of deliberate consideration and process. At the same time, faculty must respect administrators' need to act quickly and decisively. That's the way faculty members and whole programs can develop the cultural capital to argue effectively for positive change.

There are of course two basic personal trade-offs for faculty who make this kind of long-term institutional investment in complicated curricular reform or long-term institutional change, and both create difficulties. First, all the work around GenEd and now accreditation—which ultimately touches every aspect of the curriculum and affects every student who walks through the door—has absolutely taken away time and energy I might have had for more research and publishing, the normal ways we measure advancement and success in our discipline. Faculty who are not full professors can seldom afford to devote the necessary time and energy to this work, which often falls disproportionately on women and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and even then more experienced faculty with deeper institutional memory and broader experience are absolutely vital to the success of true shared governance. GenEd reform, like other major institutional efforts, always requires “faculty champions” or they will fail. Second, because I spend a lot of my time now (and 60% of my current contract) in GenEd-related administrative work, I have unfortunately lost good friends and other relationships because they view me as having gone over to “the dark side” of administration and, I guess, would now somehow actively work against the interests of my colleagues. It's untrue, and it really hurts. I hate it, but that's how polarized things are, especially when entire programs, departments, and even campuses are on the line.

Despite these difficult trade-offs, shared governance gives the most important internal mechanism for saving our programs and perhaps our jobs. If the only way we can save the humanities and social sciences—and their small subfields such as Medieval Studies—is by hitching our programs to the workforce wagon in the name of “soft skills” like communication, critical thinking, and other GenEd areas, then I'm all for it because I know a number of those students will be captured by literature (or anthropology, sociology, history, and all kinds of things they've never anticipated). We've had five years of continual real-dollar budget cuts in Alaska, and we're in the second of an additional three-year budget “compact” to reduce the university-system's budget. Our system-wide budget is now where it was in 1997-98, and this year's \$25M cut has been doubled by the impacts of COVID-19 that will likely increase even after going fully online in Fall 2020 (except for the HyFlex model for labs, practica, studio courses, and workforce programs like welding). It's only going to get worse as

we're seeing drastic cuts around the country. We can survive, but those are the stakes right now, at least in Alaska.

These realities became more apparent in Alaska at the June 5-6, 2020 BOR meeting that spelled the end of 40 programs across the state. The former president of the University of Alaska system—who was subsequently rebuffed as the sole finalist for the University of Wisconsin system in July 2020—presented as a top priority to “consolidate and redesign common GERs,” although the precise meaning of this language is unclear. I have no doubt that the GenEd will be examined on a statewide level for “efficiencies” or even potential outsourcing because it generates so much tuition, and the GenEd is one place where an institution can affect its finances. If I am asked to be involved, I will do my best to keep faculty in control of the conversation and keep student needs in the foreground, but I have been cautioned to watch my step.

The Future of General Education and Medieval Studies at UAA

In an odd twist, the fortunes of General Education and Medieval Studies at UAA are locked together. With the pandemic forcing us off campus and with the larger move to consolidate course offerings across multiple campuses, I imagine all courses possible will be converted to fully online offerings (eventually across the state) with synchronous hybrid courses meeting locally (where students in Anchorage would be face-to-face and students across the state would Zoom in). Unlike many universities perhaps, UAA has had a longstanding tradition of teaching online because we have a service area larger than many states, so a lot of us have been teaching online for years—but voluntarily, for the most part. Administration had encouraged departments—again, for years—to develop an online path through all majors, but many programs resisted (for the reasons we're seeing now so prominently in the COVID-19 pivot). However, those who did provide an online major have weathered the current storm better than those who didn't. UAA is also lucky in that we have an excellent CAFÉ (Center for Advancing Faculty Excellence), for professional development related to all areas of the curriculum, and an e-learning office that provides expertise for any faculty member (including adjuncts) to develop online courses with excellent technological options. The difference is that what was once voluntary is now mandatory, and UAA will be completely online for Fall 2020, except for the HyFlex *practica* courses that will enable infection control and social distancing.

I understand that my response to *Pedagogy and Profession's* request has extended far beyond General Education, strictly speaking, but it's because this essential feature of U.S. higher education so fully connected to every aspect of our institutional lives is under threat. I think, too, that as medievalists and as scholars who attend to Chaucer, we are well equipped to understand complex systems and the often unstated social and political tensions underlying any discursive production or cultural institution—a fact brought home even more fully by our BIPOC colleagues and their work to decenter whiteness in the curriculum, to combat racism in our institutions, and to elucidate the cultural parallels as medievalists we see between the past and our current pandemic-ridden world. I love my work as a medievalist and Chaucerian, and I'll continue to grind out an article or two here and there. Maybe a book eventually, but teaching and service will remain my focus.

This moment is a good one for teaching Chaucer and other medieval literature. I think in some ways students today are better equipped for medieval studies than previous generations primarily because of the visual and iconographic dimensions shared by medieval and contemporary culture. I start my medieval classes now by working with memes, which I will argue are just about the most

medieval thing there is! I still teach at least one course per term—usually our 400-level literary theory class (probably the most challenging in the department) in the Fall—and a 100-level GenEd Introduction to Literature in the Spring. It’s been a couple of years since I’ve done any medieval because my colleague is also trained in medieval studies. This academic year, however, I get to do Chaucer next Spring, online no doubt, and I’m converting my theory class into a multimedia / multi-camera online course based upon some work I’ve done in Alaska Native Studies and Critical Indigenous Studies (all the while attending to my own status as white and as a colonizer). And the kind of class conflicts, gender dynamics, religious controversies, guild affiliations, personal subjectivities, and nationalist identifications that are now running rampant are tailor-made for Chaucer. And students get it.

Nevertheless, the work I did in helping to develop the AKNT and D&I outcomes and to shepherd that effort through a really difficult statewide curricular (and therefore political) process is probably the best work I will ever do in my career. It affects every student who walks through the door, and maybe it will be a small part in healing generations of trauma. It’s not the career I envisioned at one time, but it’s been a good one and I hope it continues to be so—no matter the budget crises or political ill-winds. And unfortunately I think we’re just beginning to see the real decimation of public higher education in the U.S. It’s an accelerationist’s dream. I know I’m not the only one who is stunned by a cruel, crass, and nihilistic national administration (and its state sycophants) who daily commits crimes that any one of which would have brought down any previous administration. But the work we do makes a difference, and I see that most of all in my work with General Education.

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