



The Case for Skills-Based General Education

A New Approach to Ensure Value
and Relevance

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Value and Relevance

Written by **Anne Peasley, MA**

Anne Peasley has nearly a decade of experience in higher education, including ground-level academic program coordination and Provost-level projects. Most recently, she supported a process improvement initiative for general education at a land-grant university.

Designed by **Laurel Gieselmann**



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INTRODUCTION

» In a perfect world, the value of general education would be implicitly understood.

General education is, to quote one regional accreditor,¹ intended to impart “broad knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and develops skills and attitudes that the institution believes every college-educated person should possess.” A large part of the value of a bachelor’s degree can be credited to the general education model.

It’s unfortunate, then, that students so often do not see the value or relevance of general education. They periodically, and often loudly, complain about these seemingly arbitrary requirements. The headlines are perennial: “It’s Time to Get Rid of Distribution Requirements,”² “General education classes ruin learning,”³ “Are GE classes really worth it?”⁴

The perceived lack of relevance leads to a host of compounding effects. Some students respond by taking more of their core coursework at a community college, which may cause problems in the transfer process.

Others might coast through general education courses, feeling like they are wasting time and money. And often, the way that general education is explained (or not) in course catalogs or by advisors exacerbates this perception. From this point of view, it’s no wonder that students’ experience with general education makes them question the value of their college experience as a whole.

Part of the problem is that general education is, by design, broad and dispersed. But that intention isn’t always clearly communicated, or understood. Without awareness of the intention behind the design, general education curriculum can be seen as random lists of courses in disparate disciplines that never stack up into anything substantial—like a minor, certificate or microcredential. It becomes an arbitrary requirement to fulfill, or a checklist that takes time and attention away from a student’s area of interest, their major.

¹ Higher Learning Commission, Accreditation Standard 3.B.2. Of course, different accrediting bodies have differing approaches to general education, but it’s fair to say that a general (or liberal) education is much of what sets a university degree apart from technical or on-the-job training.

² Paul Hanstedt, 2020.

³ Jeff Guzman, 2016.

⁴ Erik Send and Sabrina Shahawi, 2014.



Skills and General Education

» Educators know that the strengths of general education lie in helping students develop a foundation in broad, **human skills** rather than the specific **technical skills** and knowledge imparted in any given major.⁵ In other words, the breadth and integration of the general curriculum provide a counterbalance for the depth and specificity of the major.

Employers, too, know the value of the skills developed by a general education curriculum. Time and again, they affirm that human skills are essential to success on the job, most recently in surveys conducted for the Association for American Colleges & Universities.⁶ This is backed by our research into online job postings data, where human skills are requested alongside technical skills, both equally desired.

So if educators see the value of general education, and employers see it too, how do we get students on board?

Consider skills. Every course in the university is designed to impart students with knowledge and/or skills. The language of skills bridges all academic disciplines, putting general education and the major on an even footing. And skills connect all components of an undergraduate education to each students' own professional goals.

By using skills to describe general education curriculum, we can reveal and communicate the value that already exists in it, and leverage the skills language as a way to critically examine and reconnect general education to the world of work.

**“THE LANGUAGE
OF SKILLS BRIDGES
ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES”**

⁵Human skills are what we term “soft” or “common” skills, in contrast to “hard” or “technical” skills. Some skills, such as writing, could fall into either category, and this ambiguity further compounds issues of taxonomy and communication. Unfortunately, resolving this ambiguity lies outside the scope of this paper

⁶Ashley Finley, **How College Contributes to Workforce Success**, 2021.



Reveal Existing Value

» In the classroom, students experience greater learning when they know what they are expected to learn, how they'll learn it, and why.⁷ When students do not know what they are expected to learn, they flounder. Faculty and instructors tend to focus, understandably, on the disciplinary course content of their courses (what), without mentioning the human skills that students are expected to develop alongside (how), or the relevance to the world of work (why).

For example, in a study linking classroom learning with the world of work, authors Steven C. Taylor and Catherine Haras describe the tension between the unconsciously competent habits of faculty and what they purport to teach:

» Faculty may assume that students learn teamwork when they put students in groups, critical problem-solving when they ask students to solve problems, and writing in the discipline when they assign students to write. But disciplines solve problems differently and value distinct writing genres. Experts often work alone. Faculty forget what it was like to be novices and may not **explicitly** teach agreed-upon disciplinary forms of

teamwork, problem-solving, and writing. These habits, ingrained in experts, are often opaque to students, and many worthy practices only hint at the possibility of their use in future work. Faculty should make their discipline's ways of knowing obvious to students through practices such that students can understandably signal their application to (nonacademic) employers.⁸

If this is true in the classroom, what happens when we apply the same principle to an entire curriculum? In the role they play in students' lives, many advisors and faculty may find themselves in a similar situation: experts at navigating a workplace, with habits ingrained from years of experience that may not be apparent to students. A skills-defined general education curriculum can help mitigate this tendency toward invisibility. Calling out the importance of specific skills highlights their value for students, faculty, and advisors alike.

Further, the documents used to shape students' educational pathways usually prioritize the major. Course catalogs and search

⁷Mary Ann Winkelmes, et al., "A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success," 2016.

⁸Steven C Taylor, and Catherine Haras, **Beyond Classroom Borders**, 2020. Emphasis added.



taxonomies tend to be organized by discipline, focused on conveying the skills and knowledge students will receive as part of their specific training in their field(s) of study. There is a tendency to overlook general education requirements, which are not “owned” by any particular discipline and tend to be organized by institution-level learning outcomes. When students skip directly to the requirements of their prospective major, they skip over the general education section of the catalog and thus encounter general education requirements as explained in footnotes—as an add-on.

“CALLING OUT SPECIFIC SKILLS HIGHLIGHTS THEIR VALUE FOR STUDENTS, FACULTY, AND ADVISORS”

Without a skills-based language, there is very little hope of being consistent or explicit in referring to general education in a course catalog or advising discussion. With such a heavy focus on the major, general education becomes learning that’s stuffed in around the edges, rather than a load-bearing part of the undergraduate experience. As such, general education (and human skills) becomes invisible. And when something is invisible, it’s not planned for, discussed, taught, or learned.

Introducing the language of skills allows the value of general education to become visible, providing a common thread that connects these courses.

By deliberately bringing awareness to general education as a skill-building exercise, students understand more of what they are intended to get out of the general education curriculum, and thus can spend more time learning rather than questioning.

ADVISING

» Introducing skills into conversations about academic planning right from the start aligns students’ academic options with their future career goals. Instead of exclusively framing general education as a list of requirements, or merely as a springboard to personal development, general education can be presented as intended: broad, relevant, cross-contextual learning.

Connecting the skills in general education courses to the skills that employers seek opens up opportunities for career advising much earlier in a student’s academic progression. That, in turn, helps both students and advisors make better choices about selecting courses that will be more relevant to both the major and future employment.



TEACHING

» With the importance of skills already defined at a curricular level, instructors can then teach from a position of strength, knowing that students already have an idea of why they are taking any given general education course. As referenced above, with skills already identified and reinforced on the syllabus, instructors are positioned to be more mindful and intentional in approaching skill-development in their lesson plans, assignments, and overall approach. Bringing skills more explicitly to mind could also spark conversations introducing students to real-world problems.

As a skills-based infrastructure becomes more robust, instructors will be increasingly able to share resources for explicit, clear teaching in general education courses. For more, we examine a skills-based approach to teaching in depth in our work tailored for faculty.⁹

LEARNING

» Because general education has now been contextualized for students within a framework of real-world value, students have a better idea of what they can gain from those courses, and

how general education connects to their future careers. When students are more aware of the benefit they'll get from the courses, they become more confident in their academic abilities.¹⁰

With this confidence, and knowledge that skills apply to the “real world,” students may have a better idea of how to articulate their skills and learning to themselves and others—employers, family, and friends.

» With skills, we have a mechanism to transform general education from a checklist exercise to real learning by providing an interface between the curriculum, its utility to students, and eventual use in their future careers. Because students now have a relevant framework and rationale for the intention behind the general education, it's more likely that they will connect general education to their own academic and career goals.

**“WITH SKILLS, WE
HAVE A MECHANISM TO
TRANSFORM GENERAL
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CHECKLIST EXERCISE TO
REAL LEARNING”**

⁹Remie Verougstraete, “3 Skill Insights to Support Career-Relevant Instruction” and “3 Reasons Why Faculty Should Love Skillification,” 2021.

¹⁰Mary Ann Winkelmes, et al., “A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success,” 2016.



Reconnect to the World of Work

» No matter how clearly skills are defined in general education courses, if those skills are not actually taught, or if the curriculum is missing some of the skills that employers want in the job market (or that would be attractive to faculty seeking graduate students), any improvements to communication are pointless.

Fortunately, skills also facilitate feedback and analysis of the general education curriculum. Using skills to critically analyze general education allows discussion of missed opportunities or updates to the curriculum.

What's important to note in an inventory of general education is that the list of skills generated will not compare directly with any specific job or occupation in the labor market.¹¹ Nor would we want it to, since general education is specifically designed to develop skills that transcend any particular occupation but which are essential to all.

Instead, one could compare an inventoried list of skills in any particular general education curriculum to a list of the human skills that employers have consistently identified as desirable, sourced from the labor market over the past few years. Unsurprisingly, these perennial skills change very little over time.

The skills listed here are an aggregate of the top human skills as sourced from online job postings from multiple Emsi studies of the labor market,¹² displaying what qualities employers seek from workers with a university degree.

ACCOUNTABILITY
 COLLABORATION
 COMMUNICATIONS
 CRITICAL THINKING
 CURIOSITY
 CUSTOMER SERVICE
 INFLUENCING SKILLS
 INNOVATION
 INVESTIGATION
 LEADERSHIP
 MANAGEMENT
 OPERATIONS
 PROBLEM SOLVING
 RESEARCH
 SALES
 SELF-DISCIPLINE
 TEAMWORK
 WRITING

¹¹For a more occupation-based look at these human skills, consider our 2019 report **Degrees at Work**, in which we compared six different degree types, each with its own perceived value in the labor market, to clarify the actual relationships between degree type and career outcome.

¹²Sources include: Blumenstyk, Goldie, **Career-Ready Education**, 2019; Coffey, Clare, et al., **Resilient Skills**, 2020; and Sentz, Rob, "Top Human Skills for 2021," 2021.



While by no means definitive or comprehensive, these skills are echoed in a similar study from the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) on college contributions to workforce success.¹³ This report affirms that employers seek to hire graduates with the ability to work effectively in teams, think critically and creatively, analyze and interpret data, who are digitally literate, and display ethical judgment and reasoning, among others.

CATALOG WHAT'S THERE

» The first step in making a critical analysis of the general education curriculum is to surface the skills that are taught within its courses, and inventory them. What are the main skills taught? Are there any skills missing?

To determine this, it could be useful to assemble criteria against which general education's skills are to be compared. This could be a simple list of skills or a formalized framework.¹⁴ Other resources include those developed by educational entities, such as AAC&U's LEAP framework, the competencies defined by the National Association of Colleges & Employers,¹⁵ or the World Economic Forum.¹⁶

It is then possible to compare the skills taught in existing general education courses to the skills defined within these frameworks. If all skills are accounted for in the curriculum, perhaps it will be enough to simply emphasize their importance. However, if there are gaps, it may be worth it to introduce new types of courses into the general education roster, or even reimagine the structure of the curriculum.

SURFACE WHAT'S HIDDEN

» Some of the skills on these lists, such as critical thinking, problem solving, and writing, are familiar, and likely already included in any general education curriculum. Other skills, however, such as accountability, self-discipline, and teamwork, may not be. Even if these skills are assumed to be developed by students as part of their undergraduate studies, their value to students is dampened if they are not discussed explicitly or codified in any meaningful way. Articulating and evaluating these skills often means "reading between the lines," which requires a deeper level of parsing and interpretation than the quick initial scan described in the first section of this paper.

¹³ Ashley Finley, *How College Contributes to Workforce Success*, 2021.

¹⁴ Association of American Colleges & Universities, "Liberal Education and America's Promise," 2018.

¹⁵ National Association of Colleges and Employers, "Career Readiness Defined," 2019.

¹⁶ Nahia Orduña, "Why democratizing skills is the key to the post-pandemic economy," 2021.



Although developing this deeper level of skills articulation would require longer-term consideration and discussion, it may be worth pursuing. Perhaps it's time for a microcredential on teamwork, or an ePortfolio that demonstrates growth in self-discipline. Depending on institutional mission, student interest, and the needs of regional employers, it may be worth articulating these types of skills.

INTERFACE WITH THE MAJOR

» Still other skills, such as customer service, management, sales, or operations, may be missing completely from the general education curriculum. And perhaps that's a good thing. Business-specific skills may be better taught specifically in a business setting. But consider the tendency of many liberal arts graduates to pursue careers in sales, marketing, and public relations,¹⁷ or the fact that sales skills are requested in 23% of online job postings.¹⁸ There may be more overlap between discipline-specific skills and a broad education than commonly acknowledged.

With this in mind, it may be worth considering the points at which the general education curriculum overlaps with those essential, but still discipline-specific skills. In these liminal areas, skills could be used to better integrate

the values and breadth of a general education with the world of work. Students who go into sales, for instance, would benefit from a solid foundation in ethical reasoning. Business operations tap into many variations of quantitative reasoning, in such specific skills like financial literacy, basic statistical fluency, and data visualization. Management and customer service would both benefit from the basics of economics and psychology. There are many opportunities to bring elements of a general education into the context of the modern labor market.

» Using skills as a mechanism to examine and improve the general education curriculum opens up an approach that connects the enduring tenets of a general education and the skills that students will need to succeed. This gives colleges and universities the opportunity to reexamine their curriculum in light of the many economic and cultural developments that have occurred over past decades.

Since general education courses are a high-impact learning opportunity required of all students, continued attention to the relevance of general education also ensures that skills are taught equitably across the student body, further advancing the intent of a general education.

¹⁷Michelle R. Weise, et al., *Robot Ready*, 2018.

¹⁸Clare Coffey, et al., *Resilient Skills*, 2020.



CONCLUSION

» Human skills are timeless, which has always been the essence of general education.

As the economy continues to flux, undergraduate institutions must navigate a central tension: keeping step with the ever-developing (technical) skills needed for the jobs of the future, while also providing students with a well-rounded set of (human) skills that prepare them to succeed over the course of their career. In this, a skills-defined curriculum helps keep the purpose of general education at the forefront.

Since educators, employers, and students alike all care about skill acquisition and development, skills

are a natural way to bring everyone together. Skills showcase the relevance of general education, help students prepare for a future career, and give faculty tools to better focus on teaching what matters most.

General education is essential to student success in the workplace. Using skills to describe, promote, and improve general education will lead to success for you, your institution, and your students.

If you enjoyed this white paper, explore how skills can benefit your institution.

[SkillsMatch](#) helps students inventory their skills and find curricular recommendations to achieve their goals. [Skillabi](#) surfaces the work-relevant skills in your course documents and shows how they align to labor market demand. Or, read more about our philosophy of skills in [Skills Required](#).



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Thank You

