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GENERAL EDUCATION, ADVISING, AND INTEGRATIVE LEARNING



Marc Lowenstein

ABSTRACT

Students' level of engagement with general education and their grasp of its goals are a problem at many institutions. Academic advising, which is often viewed as having the "signpost" function of directing students to the completion of their course requirements, has the potential instead to be a place where students learn to approach general education with intentionality and especially to see how they can fit its pieces together to form an integrated whole greater than the sum of its parts. Since this will be very difficult (albeit rewarding) work for students, inducing them to engage with it is as challenging as inducing them to engage with any other aspect of general education. A partial solution could lie in treating advising as coursework in its own right, an integral part of general education rather than external to it. This proposal creates challenges for advisers and costs for institutions—which are worth meeting if the institutions highly value integrative learning.

Keywords: integrative learning, academic advising, intentionality

The General Education Challenge

How can academic advising best help colleges and universities meet their general education goals? This essay proposes an answer that is independent of the wide

variety of general education curricula and also of the range of advising delivery models. Briefly put, the essay describes how advising can be more than a method of informing students of general education requirements and ensuring that the requirements are met—a means to an end—but, rather, an integral part of the curriculum and inseparable from it.

Because general education systems range from core curricula to distribution requirements to lists of learning goals that are more recommendations than requirements, “general education” will be understood here to refer to what all of these systems have in common—the knowledge, skills, and dispositions, whatever they may be, that an institution wants all its students to learn, irrespective of major. Advising systems, too, vary with respect to how they use faculty as advisers, how they use full-time staff advisers, and how advising fits into institutional organization.

In meeting general education goals, institutions face a challenge that can be looked on as one of managing students’ behavior or as one of educating students’ perceptions. The *behavior* at stake is students’ degree of success at completing courses that meet the institution’s goals for them—at schools where there are specific requirements for graduation, this amounts to whether they meet those requirements. The *perceptions* involved are students’ perceptions of the purpose of the general education curriculum and how it fits into their educational plans.

The overt behavior that is challenging for institutions is simple failure to take required courses, or perhaps to take them in proper sequence or at the right stage of a student’s career, or to fail them due to insufficient effort. The perception lying behind this behavior is that general education classes are *obstacles* that the institution has (for reasons not clear to the students) placed in students’ way, slowing their progress toward what they have come to college to study. Depending on the type of curriculum, these classes may also be seen as something to be “gotten out of the way” early in a student’s career—or alternatively to be postponed in the hope that eventually a way can be found to avoid them altogether (Laff, 2006, p. 38; Robbins, 2014, p. 28).

These perceptions by students are not entirely under institutions’ control. They may originate with family and friends: the response to “I’m going to State U. in September” may be, “Great, what are you going to major in?” There is also a widespread cultural supposition that college degrees are utilitarian goods pursued in order to enter chosen careers, and for each such career there is a specific appropriate major—hence the only part of the college experience whose purpose is clear is that major. Legitimate concerns about student loan debt contribute to a return-on-investment style of evaluating the decision to go to college and decisions students make while there.

Moreover, there is little in most students' K–12 experience that prepares them to understand the structure of a college curriculum. They may have heard that it is important to be “well rounded,” but that phrase is terribly vague, fails to articulate a rationale for itself, and may apply to making sure one has plenty of extracurricular activities rather than to one's choice of courses.

But if institutions do not create students' misperceptions about general education, they nonetheless do contribute. The following statements certainly do not characterize all institutions, or even fully describe any institution, but anecdotally they are familiar.

Often there is too much pressure, too early, to commit to a major. To be sure, there are majors that cannot be completed unless one begins them in one's first year, but these are exceptions. The pressure may lead students to make unwise decisions, and certainly to feel unnecessary anxiety, but for purposes of the present discussion what is problematic is that this focus contributes to the impression that one's major is what is important.

Institutions do not always explain their general education curricula well enough to students. At my former institution the process of doing that began at new student orientation during the summer. Students received a very thorough explanation of the rationale for our distinctive approach to general education and then—since they would have to register for classes the same day—the details of the graduation requirements. The latter were provided in writing and of course were much more concrete, as well as being relevant to the anxiety-provoking registration process, so students were more likely to retain them than to retain the relatively abstract philosophical statement, for which many students had no conceptual reference point. To hope that students would still be thinking about that philosophical statement as they departed campus later in the day was idealistic in the extreme.

Students' focus on general education as a set of requirements rather than of learning goals has further implications. As they progress through the institution selecting classes every term, they have an incentive to pay attention to the requirements (even though some do not pay enough attention); they have much less incentive to focus on the philosophy and learning goals, except at rare institutions where the curriculum is described *only* in terms of those goals such as Brown University (2014). Students approaching graduation are likely to be more interested in exactly which requirements remain to be met than in why those requirements exist—that is, unless they are trying to develop a case for dodging one of them. To help such students, a checklist of requirements is readily available—now likely in electronic form as part of an online degree audit. There is little intentionality in students' interaction with this checklist.

Often, though not always, general education requirements are structured in such a way that most of the credits are to be taken in the first two years. Certainly there are good reasons for this: Some of the courses are intended partly to develop skills that will be useful elsewhere; heavy focus on the major including research and internships is perhaps best saved for later years, when intellectual maturity has progressed. But however rational this structure may be, it has the further unintended effect of reinforcing students' perception that general education courses are obstacles to be "gotten out of the way" so that the real work can begin.

At some institutions there is still another reason why students do not actively engage with their general education classes. Where the requirements are met through a distribution of departmental courses, students enrolled in these courses will include both "general students" and declared or intended majors. These groups of students will have different motivations and different levels of preparation, and instructors will naturally be likely to be more committed to meeting the needs of their majors—not necessarily because they care more about them but because for majors who will take follow-up courses there is a greater need to "cover" specific material. In such circumstances the instructors may also spend less time focusing intentionally on their disciplines' distinctive ways of knowing and relationships to other disciplines, the sort of focus probably more closely related to why the faculty want general students to encounter the disciplines.

The Role of Advising

How can advising help institutions address this problem? The first answer that many people would offer is that advisers (whether faculty or staff) are precisely the people tasked with explaining the curriculum to students and helping them choose classes that will meet the requirements. Advisers who are particularly conscientious may also pay attention to the order in which students take these classes and query the rationale for their choice of specific classes. This role that advisers can play may be called the "class selection role."

Certainly it is desirable that advisers do these things. But advisers will be fighting an uphill battle in trying to engage students in doing more than the minimum to meet requirements. There is another, richer role that advisers could play, in which they serve not as course-selection assistants but as full-fledged educators directly involved in facilitating student learning. Describing and advocating that role is the principal purpose of this essay. (The ideas laid out here are also described, in the context of expounding a theory of advising, in Lowenstein, 2014.)

Integrated Learning

The integrated learning model of advising is independent of the principal variables mentioned at the beginning of the essay. It does not matter what kind of general education curriculum an institution has—whether a core curriculum or no requirements at all. And it does not matter whether advising is done by faculty, staff, or a mix, though each of these systems will require its own set of adjustments by advisers and institutions.

In the integrated learning model advisers do most of what they do in the class selection model, but they do much more. They facilitate students' deriving value from their general education courses above and beyond what is taught in the classes. Advising on this view is a locus of learning in its own right, not merely a signpost to learning as the class selection model would have it.

Explicating this model begins with noting a particular general education learning goal for students. Specific learning goals for the various general education classes that students will take include knowledge of facts, theories, and ways of knowing; skills of communication, analysis, and evaluation; and intellectual dispositions. A further accomplishment, which every institution would surely hope for, would be that students experience those discrete classes not as isolated and unrelated experiences but as integral parts of a coherent whole. Students who achieve this can understand the ways in which these parts complement, contrast with, and support each other and how they all contribute to a meaningful understanding of the world. These students will also be more intentionally aware of the transferrable skills their institutions want them to develop but which are often lost sight of amid a focus on content in their courses. The integrated overview and enhanced intentionality, furthermore, create the best possible platform for a lifetime of learning since they provide a context for new experiences and ideas as they are encountered. Such a platform needs to be stable enough to do its job but flexible enough to adjust to dramatic new ideas or information that could arise at any time, such as new scientific paradigms.

A student should begin developing an integrated overview early in his or her college career and should build on it regularly, as new courses not only add material but also change the student's perspective on material already learned. To achieve this, the student needs to reflect constantly on how new pieces fit into the puzzle and—to continue that metaphor—how new pieces may change where prior pieces should be placed. A student who commits these reflections to writing will be thankful later for the foresight to have done so, since the overview will be quite complex by the time of graduation. The process of building the integrated overview is not limited to one category of courses, "general education courses." Epistemologically there is no firewall between classes taken to meet the

requirements of one's major and those taken to meet general education goals (or requirements). The relationships between these two categories are just as important to explore as those within the categories.

Two additional points about the value of an integrated overview: first, students who have achieved this step have made of their education something that is more than the sum of its parts. A "checklist" of requirements is not only a flimsy representation of the learning aimed for in the classes; it is an *inaccurate* representation as well, since there is an important category of integrative learning that it fails to capture. Second, a student's integrated overview is not only constructed out of the learning in individual courses; it also forms a sort of feedback loop by enhancing that learning. The student's understanding of each course is enriched by recalling and reflecting on it in the context of other courses and of the overview developed out of them.

Integrative learning is not introduced here as a new concept. It has been, in particular, a prominent focus of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). (See AAC&U, 2005, 2008, 2014.) What is newly proposed here is an advising-based approach to integration as a means to strengthening general education as a whole.

A student's task of building an integrated overview is easy to summarize but very difficult to accomplish. And it will not come easily to most students, because of factors already discussed. A student is unlikely to attempt it, let alone do very well with it, without the prodding and expert assistance of a professional who is suited to the role. Who will that be?

A student who is extraordinarily lucky may encounter a series of professors in both major courses and other courses *all* of whom are interested in helping students build their integrated overviews and who as part of their teaching engage students in intentional exploration of how the present course fits into their overviews. Very few students, however, at any institution, will be so fortunate. Some faculty will do a bit of this teaching, for example, to place a major course within a sequence. But many are not ideally equipped to do it—depending on their type of institution they may not have been hired with an expectation that they would have the necessary breadth of perspective, instead being rewarded more for specialized scholarship. In any case most faculty in most courses are more focused on covering content, and I would not argue that in general this is wrong. And that is precisely where academic advising comes in.

How Advising Supports Integration

A student's academic adviser is just the person who can remain with the student over a period of more than a semester and work with the student

on the intentional development of an integrated overview of the student's entire education. Why the adviser is better situated for this task than course instructors may be obvious but is worth discussing. One reason is that the adviser has regularly scheduled "teachable moments" with the student at course selection/registration time. Meetings arranged for this purpose are also excellent opportunities to look at relationships among current classes, previous classes, and potential future classes. You still need to take a social science course? Let's talk about why that requirement is there and how ways of knowing in the social sciences are like and unlike those in the natural sciences or, for that matter, the humanities. What are you working on right now? An English literature paper? How is reading the novels you've been reading different from reading in your other courses? Are there any similarities between finding evidence in the text to support your interpretation of a novel and finding information in the news to support your views on a public policy issue discussed in political science class?

Another reason why the adviser is better situated than course instructors to help students develop their integrated overview is the adviser's inherently wider perspective. Except in special cases where the adviser *is* the course instructor, the adviser has the advantage of having no attachment to any particular piece of the curriculum and hence the ability to look at all of it with the student from a global perspective.

How would this work in practice? What methods would the adviser use to help the student with this challenging task? Certainly regular conversations between adviser and student are ideal occasions for exploring integration. But they will not happen without effort and skill. At least at first, advisers will need to ask more pointed questions than "How are things going this semester?" since students not accustomed to intentional discussion of learning will not reward a vague question like that with a very forthcoming response. A better start: "I know you're taking both intro to psych and American history right now. Let's think about how these subjects are alike and different" or "Can you think of anything you've learned in psych that might help to shed light on something that happened in American history?"

Even with a very good start, the adviser will need to be wary of getting sidetracked into complaints about the history professor's boring lectures or the psych instructor's unfair grading. Though even here, such topics can be put to good use: "Let's explore what Dr. Harris may have been looking for in that paper" or "Maybe there's something you can think about while listening to Dr. Morgan's lectures that will make the experience more interactive for you."

The most challenging integrative learning conversations for the adviser will naturally be the earliest ones in a student's career, since the student has fewer

experiences to use as context for new ones and less experience in general with active learning or with intentionality. After a year or two of participating in these discussions the student will likely be better able to respond in ways the adviser is hoping for—or perhaps even in surprising but creative ways the adviser did not anticipate. The eventual outcome is for the student approaching graduation to habitually ask provocative integrative questions *without* being prompted—for the student will need to do that for himself or herself long after graduation, when there is no adviser on hand to do it.

These conversations can be supplemented by other pedagogies that will strengthen integrative learning while emphasizing (by virtue of their similarity to classroom learning) that this is an important area of learning for students to attend to. One method is to have these conversations in a group format. This practice brings some efficiencies—not only in the sense that one adviser can work with more than one student at a time but also in that (especially among relatively new students) the pool of learning experiences that can be compared/contrasted/synthesized is greatly increased. Where advising is thought of as a course selection/registration process the benefits of group advising may be dubious, but when it is seen as a learning experience the benefits are comparable to those in any setting where students have the opportunity to learn from each other's thinking.

Finally, as with most other types of learning, students will benefit most from integrative learning experiences if they reinforce their oral participation by putting their thoughts in writing. Even where there is no public audience, writing demands more careful organization than conversation does and has the further advantage that the product can persist through time for future reference and comparison with later thinking on the same topic. Moreover, it is an activity students can do on their own time in between meetings with their adviser. Reflective writing is becoming a familiar pedagogy in other areas, such as internships or service learning experiences, so employing it as part of integrative learning further reinforces the kinship of integrative learning to other loci of learning.

Robbins (2014), in what may be the first article connecting advising with AAC&U's advocacy of integrative learning, finds congruence between AAC&U's formulation and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education standards for advising. He (2014) says, "The advising interaction provides one of the best situations in which students can learn the value of an integrative liberal learning education and the outcomes that will benefit them so they become more intentional about their own educations" (p. 29). The present essay makes a slightly different point: Advising is not only a place to teach

students *about* the value of integrative learning; it is the preeminent venue in which that integrative learning happens.

How to Encourage Participation

Is this picture of how students will engage with advising unduly idealistic? If advising is being proposed as a solution to the problem of student engagement with general education, why don't all of the problems discussed earlier apply just as well to advising? Why would students willingly do this extra work, since they are busy with other activities and—at least initially—do not see how this will benefit them?

The answer lies in fully developing the implications of saying that advising is a locus of learning and an integral part of general education. If advising does fit that description, then students should receive the same incentives for participating in it that they have for participating in their other learning experiences, their courses. In other words advising ought to be a graded, credit-bearing activity. The argument is parallel to one that can be applied to any other general education learning goal: even though students will benefit intellectually from gaining historical perspective, we do not expect them to read history books and write history research papers just for fun—we award academic credit for doing it.

Exactly how this would work varies with the curricular structures at institutions, but in one way or another the proposal is that part of the curricular space that students devote to general education be allocated to advising. For example, to use one simple model, in a system where there are credit-hour-based general education requirements students might enroll in one credit hour worth of advising per semester. Along with academic credit—as in the case of other classes—come assignments and grades. Assignments could include readings appropriate to stimulating integrative learning, preparation for individual or group meetings with the adviser, and even papers. A particularly useful exercise would be for students to maintain an e-portfolio throughout their careers in which they collect work done to achieve general education goals, along with an ongoing reflective journal that tracks their progress toward those goals, explains why items have been included in the portfolio, and above all demonstrates integrative learning while talking about how past, present, and planned coursework fits together. The adviser is the “instructor of record” for this work, meets with students—individually or in groups, in person or electronically—and evaluates students' achievements in the area of integrative learning.

Students' curricula are not infinitely expandable, so credits allocated to one activity are credits not available for another. The proposal to allocate credit to

advising will create a challenge for curriculum committees or general education committees, which, however idealistic they may be, also have to concern themselves with dividing up a finite pie. The argument for this effort being worth the trouble lies in the value to the student and the institution of the learning achieved in advising. Integration is a general education learning goal as important as any other, and efforts devoted to reflection and intentionality reinforce the achievement of other learning goals as well. The investment of student time will thus pay off.

Parallel to the challenge of making academic credit work from a student perspective is that of making it work for advisers. There are separate approaches to this depending on institutional advising systems. For advisers who are full-time professional staff, teaching the integrative learning course becomes their principal—perhaps their only—duty. This has further implications discussed below. For advisers who are faculty members, teaching the course becomes part of their regular teaching load. Determining how that will fit in is not without headaches, but it can be done. The details will depend on local circumstances that are too varied to try to account for here.

Are Advisers Up to the Challenge?

Many advisers are not up to the challenge. Many faculty members, however skilled they are as both teachers and scholars, do not have very much experience in the kinds of thinking they will need to do with students under this model. Some have had little incentive to focus on how their discipline relates to and compares with others since years ago when they entered graduate school. But it is *not* necessary that they be familiar with the most recent and most esoteric developments in other disciplines in order to pursue integrative questions with students. They need only a fundamental knowledge of the epistemologies and most important theories of these disciplines and the ability to recognize the similarities and differences among them. It is unlikely that anyone intelligent enough and intellectually skilled enough to earn a doctoral degree and sustain a scholarly career lacks the aptitude to master this type of thought. Currently for most university faculty the incentives to do so may be lacking, but that can be remedied, as discussed below.

Among full-time staff advisers, the challenge takes a form that is not so different. Many of them have educational backgrounds and understandings of research methods that are focused entirely in the social sciences and not very much experience with other areas of the intellectual spectrum. They, too, have had little incentive to venture intellectually very far abroad. Moreover, many of them work in environments where advising is perceived more from a student

services than an academic perspective, and there may be little in their training or list of responsibilities that encourages them to feel like academics.

The only relevant difference between these two groups of advisers is that the faculty as a group are more academically diverse, whereas among the full-time advisers social sciences are strongly overrepresented. Faculty on the whole are also more likely to have doctorates, but that may not be as important, except where doctorates may have been earned through interdisciplinary research.

Are Institutions Up to the Challenge?

Many institutions are not up to the challenge. Moreover, adjusting will not be easy. As already mentioned, part of the integrative learning model is that institutions award credit (in whatever form fits their curricula) for academic advising. Doing so will certainly have a cost, in terms of credits not being available to allocate elsewhere. The argument for this trade-off lies in the value of integrative learning to the institution and the enhanced achievement of other general education goals by students who understand them more deeply and in better context.

But there are other costs as well. The work of facilitating integrative learning is more labor intensive than that of signing registration forms. Institutions that have been content to assign full-time advisers numbers of advisees in the hundreds, or to look the other way when some faculty advisers have minimal contact with their students, will have to think about student/adviser ratios the same way they think about class sizes and student/faculty ratios. One way or another—either through employing more advising personnel or through allocating more of people's time to advising—institutions will have to commit human resources to advising.

And as discussed in the previous section, they will also have to pay more attention to the skills of those they employ as advisers. At the time of this writing the pool of people able to do the kind of advising described here is not large enough. Institutions will have to seek those individuals out and possibly in some cases lure them away from other types of work. More likely, especially in the near term, they will need to provide intensive professional development activities for existing personnel or for new employees who seem to have the potential and motivation for this specialized work. Such activities could include in-house training and workshops and support for attendance at conferences and short courses.

One possible source of such "new employees who seem to have potential" is the substantial number of people earning doctoral degrees who are not likely to make careers as tenure-track faculty. This group has received increased attention recently. For lack of sufficient positions in faculty ranks to absorb them, some

universities have begun providing assistance to help them find careers outside academe (Patel, 2014). This effort is long overdue, and if it is successful, it will help match up some very talented people with appropriate positions in the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors. But perhaps some of those doctoral candidates would like to remain in higher education even if not as faculty. If they are interested in thinking more broadly than just about their discipline and would like to work with students, a career in academic advising might be an attractive option for them. For these people, as well as for those doctoral students who *are* destined for faculty careers, doctorate-granting institutions ought to offer either courses or other opportunities for them to prepare for the kind of advising work described here.

Ideally, if enough institutions were to commit themselves to the desirability of having a cadre of advisers prepared for the specialized work of integrative learning, there could be value in creating graduate degree programs designed to prepare those individuals. Currently very few people prepare for advising careers through a specifically dedicated degree program. A Master of Science in Academic Advising is offered by Kansas State University (2014) and sponsored by the National Academic Advising Association, though its curriculum is not heavily weighted toward the themes discussed here.

Another implication of the integrative learning model of advising, both for institutions and for higher education in general, is a reappraisal of the stature of advising work and the people who do it. If advisers are responsible for some of the most important and academically demanding learning that institutions aspire to for their students, those advisers merit a status at the institution that is more akin to the status of faculty than is currently the norm at schools employing full-time advisers. Certainly that development will be a valuable means for persuading Ph.D. students to consider advising as a career option. And for faculty who serve as advisers, their advising work deserves to be understood not as a bothersome service activity but as educative work on the same level as teaching—and needs to be treated as such by tenure and promotion committees.

A Note About Assessment

General education and academic advising are both areas where many institutions are working on outcomes assessment. This is not an appropriate place to describe the work in either area in detail; for present purposes the interesting point is that if advising is understood as integrative learning, the two areas of assessment will converge to a considerable extent. Perhaps

the most ideal data for both purposes will be work that students have done to demonstrate their integrative learning. This work will at once show what they have learned through their academic advising and will serve at the same time as an indicator of their progress in general education: assessing integration directly and at least some of their other general education goals as well in the process.

Conclusion

The main thesis of this essay has been that academic advising can be the most powerful tool in helping institutions achieve their general education goals, not merely by encouraging students to take the necessary courses but by serving as a locus of general education learning in its own right. It does this by focusing on intentionality in students' plan for selecting general education requirements and, above all, by facilitating students' integration of all their educational experiences into a coherent whole. Integrated learning is itself often an institutional general education goal, but even where it is not explicitly so, integration enhances the intentional achievement of other learning goals. Advisers are more likely than class instructors to be well situated to facilitate integrative learning and can use several means to do so. Students will be more likely to engage in this process if advising is a credit-bearing, graded activity like other courses. Developing the skills for this kind of advising in both faculty advisers and full-time advisers will require effort on their part and a commitment of resources by institutions. It will also have the effect of raising the stature of advisers and advising in institutions and in higher education.

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