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General Education for Graduate Education

By CATHARINE R. STIMPSON

The graduate students who came to see me had teaching in the university's general-education program on their mind. Their brief: They didn't like it. They had to prepare too much unfamiliar material. Deflected away from their specialties, they were wasting time.

Privately, I was appalled. "You are scholars and intellectuals," I said. "Surely, our responsibility is to explore what is unfamiliar to us and to others." My piety was treated as what it must have seemed -- a piety. Fortunately, I had not said "our joy and responsibility," which would have doubled the dose of piety.

I shifted from principle to expediency. "If you go on the academic job market, teaching general education will be a part of many of the job descriptions you will read. Learning how to do it now will be helpful later," I cajoled. "We'll learn how to do it when we have to do it," I was told. "We won't get near a job if we haven't done research we can publish in our discipline."

Credit them, I thought, for understanding the harshness of the job market they were soon to enter and its incentives to be conventionally professional. But I was also worried about their intellectual growth. "What ideas particularly matter to you? What fields?" I asked. "I'm working on gender," a woman told me. And what was she teaching in the general-education course? "Genesis," she said. "But that's one of the founding global myths about gender," I answered with excitement. "But I've already read it," she answered, "in an undergraduate course."

For several reasons, that encounter haunts me. Psychologically, I wonder if I did not behave like one of the platitude-dripping fogies whom I had satirized and endured when I was a graduate student. Intellectually, the experience has evolved in my mind until it has become a parable about the travails of our appreciation of depth in contemporary culture. Why would a very smart graduate student assume that one reading of a profound text -- in translation to boot -- would be sufficient for understanding it? Why would a once-over of the surface of Genesis be considered an OK interpretative gesture?

Educationally, my exchange has also become a parable about general education in the contemporary university. If coherently and passionately taught, general education does much good for both students and teachers. Where else would a graduate student interested in gender read Genesis? Yet, graduate students often resent teaching general education and may fail to see how it has enriched their own lives. Doing so, they are both influenced by, and mimic, too many of their mentors and professors for whom gen ed is an unwanted grind for serious faculty members and gruel for undergraduates.

Yet, the graduate students of today will, if they become academics, control the curriculum of tomorrow. If they are indifferent to general education, what will happen to it when they are in charge? I am not the first to ask this question, but I am, I believe, the first to propose the following innovation: general education for graduate education.

Surprisingly, the reform movement in graduate education has done comparatively little with the curriculum -- although it has supported interdisciplinary work, and although individual disciplines have vigorously examined their curriculums. The greater concerns of the reform movement have been graduate students as a labor force, pedagogy, career training, and the processes of graduate education -- for example, mentoring or the time it takes to extract a degree from graduate school.

What would general education for graduate education be like? Designed for people who have chosen advanced inquiry as their vocation, it would not just be an upscale version of general education for undergraduates. Its purpose would be to cultivate a sophisticated understanding of the nature and structures of advanced inquiry itself. One of its byproducts could be a greater appreciation of the place of a nonspecialized curriculum. But general education for graduate education would also serve two of the overarching purposes of general education for undergraduates as it has developed in the United States: the provision of a common intellectual experience to an increasingly diverse student body, and the exploration of what it means

to be a particular kind of person.

Take each of those two in turn.

First, creating a common intellectual experience. Quite possibly, lurking below general education for undergraduates in the United States has been an unconscious nostalgia for the role of the liberal arts in the medieval university. There were set books. Eventually, there was, in scholasticism, a set methodology. The faculty of arts was the gateway to the professional schools of theology, law, and medicine.

However, some explicit justifications of general education have been a response not to the backward pull of the medieval university but to the very present push of a burgeoning, growing modern America that has been sending more students of varying backgrounds to college. In the mid-20th century, general education was to create a classroom experience that would glue together cohorts of such diverse students. For James Bryant Conant, who, as president of Harvard University, was the moving force behind its 1945 report on general education colloquially and commonly known as the "Red Book," universities were to choose students not because they shared a similar social background, but because they signaled the promise and ability to join a meritocratic elite. General education would teach those future leaders about the connections between truth and freedom, and, as a consequence, give them the tools to shape a shared democratic future.

Graduate students today are as diverse as the global map. The Graduate School of Arts and Science at New York University, my institution, enrolls men and women from more than 100 countries. Their differences are academic as well as demographic. Merely medium in size, we give these students a choice of 45 programs with 200 different tracks. Diversity and choice exact a price. The graduate experience can -- and usually does -- become isolated within a department or program. That is where seminars, advisers, dissertation committees, holiday parties, and brown-bag lunches dwell. Such a social and educational architecture can provide a sense of a secure home, but, negatively, it can also breed a sense of fragmentation and isolation. As I have watched efforts to organize graduate assistants, I have concluded that one of their attractions, especially to the most active organizers, has been the sense of cross-university solidarity they offer.

The common intellectual experience that could be the foundation of general education in graduate education, and that would set it apart from undergraduate general education, could be a history, global in scope, of institutions of advanced inquiry themselves. The modern research university did not arrive wrapped in cellophane in a UFO that happened to land in Berlin in the 19th century. Significantly, the institutions of advanced inquiry have not exclusively been universities.

I think, for example, of European academies or of today's private biotech laboratories. Graduate students have chosen to spend a big chunk of their lives in a research university with a complex but mappable past that connects the university to major social and intellectual movements.

A teachable history would include four themes: the evolution of the contemporary disciplines and their paradigms (that is, why graduate students confront the fields they do); the demography of scholars and intellectuals (that is, who graduate students are and have been); the relations between an ideal of freedom of inquiry and inquiry itself (that is, the moral conditions of scholarship); and the governance of institutions of inquiry (that is, who controls and pays for them). Amputated from their own history as they now are, graduate students have an incomplete identity and a foreshortened understanding of the nature and contests of inquiry itself. So wounded, how can they be expected to advance and defend inquiry fully, spaciouly, and carefully?

Such a course in history might include Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, published in 1818 and written by a young woman, the daughter of a radical feminist and wife of a radical poet, conversant with the scientific theories of her time, but unable to get a university education because of her gender. Her character Victor Frankenstein is a gifted scientist who wishes both to discover the causes of life and to create new life. He succeeds, but then runs away from the man he has manufactured, whom he finds monstrous. Alone, despised, Frankenstein's creation goes on a rampage. Frankenstein's sin is twofold: his hubris in imitating God and creating life, and his heartlessness in refusing to nurture and educate and love his new Adam. His story is also a vehicle for expressing a pervasive fear of science and technology out of control, a fear that graduate students of all disciplines must understand.

Studying Mary Shelley in a general-education course for graduate students could also extend to the work of her descendants from all fields who are exploring the moral consequences of scientific inquiry, including the invention of nuclear weapons and the cultivation of stem cells. Perhaps most profoundly, Shelley's descendants are asking if scientific creativity has not changed the definition of being human. The borders between man and machine, especially between mind and computer, are no longer so sharply demarcated. Nor are the borders between the human and other species. How purely human am I if I have a pig valve implanted in my once-sputtering heart?

Indeed, a second purpose of general education for undergraduates has been to nurture a particular kind of person. For Conant,

old dichotomy between disciplinary and interdisciplinary work, or, to put the distinction in other words, between specialized and interdisciplinary work. The disciplinary and the interdisciplinary, or the specialized and the interdisciplinary, should not be an either/or construction. They, too, are codependents, part of a both/and construction.

Interdisciplinarians are hugely codependent; they need to know something of all the disciplines if they are to transcend disciplinary borders. How, in corporate parlance, can we think outside that much-maligned box if there is no box there to think outside of? Disciplinarians are also codependent, since they need the interdisciplinarians to ask new questions and make fresh networks and connections. Any worthwhile institution of advanced inquiry needs them both. Any scholar must understand them both. General education in graduate education would make that point clear.

Even more important, general education for graduate education would insist that our survival depends on bringing to bear a multiplicity of perspectives upon life's forces and phenomena, its movements and complexities. Our constructed sense of life must be as rich and thick and hybrid and multiplicitous as life itself.

Let me offer one stark, contemporary example: a man planning a major act of bioterrorism. We won't get him -- in all meanings of "get" -- if all that we do is to declare war and have law enforcement target him. We also need the artist to imagine him; the humanist to hear his words and translate his language, and understand his history and religion; the social scientist to map his politics, ethnography, and psychology; and the scientist to decipher what his weapon is and how to disarm it. Only with collaboration will we begin to be able to understand the terrorist, and only if we understand him can we really stop him and the next generation of terrorists he might be recruiting.

Yet, general education in graduate education would also defend the necessities of specialization. As our life becomes more and more complex and differentiated, specialization is desirable and necessary. It does focus thought. It does force us to push further and further into a question. Encouraging depth, it discourages shallowness and superficiality -- a constant risk of interdisciplinarity. To be sure, specialization also breeds rigid and isolated departmental structures, the "silos" of contemporary jargon about advanced inquiry. Isolated departments fear and disdain The Other, departments in another field or budgetary unit.

Specialization also nurtures a fetishistic attachment to one subject, activity, or method. Francis Bacon, a founder of modern scientific thought, was aware of those dangers. In *Novum Organum*, published in 1620, he sought to reconstruct the sciences. The book is also a profound analysis of the ways in which the mind can go wrong. Of specialization, he wrote:

"Men become attached to certain particular sciences and speculations, either because they fancy themselves the authors and inventors thereof, or because they have bestowed the greatest pains upon them and become most habituated to them. But men of this kind, if they betake themselves to philosophy and contemplations of a general character, distort and color them in obedience to their former fancies; a thing especially to be noted in Aristotle, who made his natural philosophy a mere bondservant to his logic, thereby rendering it contentious and well nigh useless."

Moreover, the knowledge that specialization generates may seem notoriously arcane, useless, frivolous, worthy of nothing but the Golden Fleece Award that Sen. William Proxmire from Wisconsin once invented and gave to government grants he found especially ludicrous. However, when trouble comes, and it will, the knowledge that has seemed arcane becomes essential. Scholarship about Afghanistan no longer seems so peripheral to American officials and citizens. I often think that great research centers are like gas stations. Drivers speed and zoom past them cavalierly, but then a driver suddenly needs gas or oil or spare parts, and heads straight for the once-ignored station. Society likes the credentials the university offers, but speeds past them -- until it has to know something unexpectedly. Happily, there the university is with its robes and funny hats and nerds and suddenly useful pumps of specialized knowledge.

To institute experimental programs in general education in graduate education on most campuses would require a shift in the culture of the research university that faculty members -- who are responsible for a university's intellectual climate and curriculum -- would have to lead. However, in autumn 2000, my graduate school, with the support of two private donors, constructed a small seedbed, a group of 10 students drawn from across the university and from a variety of disciplines.

They were chosen as participants either through nomination by a faculty member or by self-nomination, and were studying epidemiology, history, comparative literature, economics, music, neurosciences, public policy, and education. The group is known, not very imaginatively, as the Graduate Forum.

They meet at least once a month, and their deliberations are summarized on a forum Web site. The purpose of the deliberations is deceptively simple -- nothing so grand as an exploration of the history of institutions of advanced inquiry. The students are to discuss their work with each other, baring the fundamental assumptions and methods behind it and justifying its importance. It's a start.

