

## **“General Education in Virginia’s System of Higher Education”**

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to the  
Governor’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education

North Run Corporate Center – J. Sargent Reynolds Community College  
Richmond, VA  
February 10, 1999

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Historically, discussions about general education achieve traction precisely where they engage discussions regarding the prospects of democratic or republican life. That holds true throughout the history of the Commonwealth. It remains true in recent times, when practices in general education throughout the United States have been the subject of pervasive critique and profound skepticism.

On the basis of a comparative assessment, I am prepared to say that Virginia fares reasonably well in the context of this pervasive criticism. That is to say, our institutions, especially our public institutions, have in several cases answered by anticipation many of the most damning criticisms (which ought to be taken seriously rather than defensively dismissed). For example, perhaps no criticism of practices in general education is more persuasive than that which identifies a seemingly endless series of increasingly unrelated or over-specialized courses as fulfilling the very specific goals of a general education curriculum.

In Virginia, however, some of our institutions provide praiseworthy models of reform, systematically reducing the number of courses qualifying to fulfill requirements, at the same time as making the requirements themselves more intellectually defensible. Mary Washington College offers a powerful example of this process, and James Madison University performs near to the same level. Had we already arrived at a policy of true reward for superior performance, these institutions would surely have been rewarded for their efforts.

A large measure of the responsibility for these accomplishments must surely fall to the nearly decade-old restructuring and assessment initiatives in Virginia. Those initiatives directed our institutions to turn a useful attention toward core practices and goals, with the helpful consequence of thoughtful reforms generated on the ground by the very folk who were nearest and best informed.

Because we should already know how successfully to defend general education curricula in higher education, it will not be wasted effort to situate our concerns in the context of the historical developments that have driven this discussion. After doing that, I will speak more specifically about Virginia’s accomplishments and the areas in which there remains ample room for improvement. Finally, I will identify what seem to me the appropriate paths and forums of reform.

## **Definitions of General Education**

To identify or define the goals of general education, we would do well to test how far we understand the first formulations of it in the official annals of the Commonwealth.

The State first attained the level of official and coherent expression of public goals in this regard in the “Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia” of 1818. That report is most helpful, but we may usefully turn first to the elaboration that followed the report, when the “Rector and Visitors,” established as a consequence of the report, petitioned the Congress of the United States to eliminate the tariff duty on the importation of books. For in that petition they signal still more forcefully the range of subjects in which they thought it appropriate to offer general instruction.

That the Commonwealth of Virginia has thought proper lately to establish an University, for instruction generally in all the useful branches of science...That the difficulty resulting from this mode of procuring books of the first order in the sciences, and in foreign languages, ancient and modern, is an unfair impediment to the American student, who, for want of these aids, already possessed or easily procurable in all countries except our own, enters on his course with very unequal means, with wants unknown to his foreign competitors, and often with that imperfect result which subjects us to reproaches not unfelt by minds alive to the honor and mortified sensibilities of their country. That the value of science to a republican people, the security it gives to liberty, by enlightening the minds of its citizens, the protection it affords against foreign power, the virtues it inculcates, the just emulation of the distinction it confers on nations foremost in it – in short, its identification with power, morals, order, and happiness... are topics which your petitioners do not permit themselves to urge on the wisdom of Congress, before whose minds these considerations are already present, and bearing with their just weight.

We find in the appeal three useful indices:

- First, comparative assessment of the standards of general education with reference to the attainments of those thought most advanced;
- Second, the public good expected to be realized from general education at the highest level; and,
- Third, the voice of a lay leadership that lays out the goals publicly identified and pursued.

That the fruits of general education may be expressed as “power, morals, order, and happiness” may appear less than intuitive to us, for we typically express the goals of general education in reference to individual rather than corporate attainments. But the “Report of the Commissioners” makes clear that, while education in itself targets the individual, it aims at the public good.

The first indication of this emerges in the consideration that the commissioners carefully distinguished the ends of general education at the higher level from the ends of education in general. Also known as the “Rockfish Gap” report, it distinguishes “primary” and “higher” education. The former provides for the citizen who “observes with intelligence and faithfulness all the

social relations under which he shall be placed.” Accordingly, it called for instructing “the mass of our citizens in [their] rights, interests and duties, as men and citizens.” Wherefore one learns “to calculate, to communicate ideas, contents, accounts, and writing, to improve moral faculties (by reading), to observe duties to neighbors and country, to know his rights, and to choose wisely the delegates to represent him.” This is the standard of lower or “primary” education. It is notable that, today, we often hear similar recitations describing higher education.

What lay beyond this standard in the “Rockfish Gap” report was the goal “to form the statesmen, legislators, and judges on whom prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend.” Students educated to this higher level were “to expound the principles and structures of government, the laws which regulate the intercourse of nations, those formed municipally for our own government, and a sound spirit of legislation.” People so educated would “harmonize and promote the interests of agriculture, manufacture, and commerce.” They would, moreover, “develop the reasoning faculties of our youth, enlarge their minds, cultivate their morals.” They would “enlighten them with mathematical and physical science, which advance the arts, and administer to the health, the subsistence, and comforts of life; and generally, to form the habits of reflection and correct action...”

Thus, we see elucidated a series of professions directly to be prepared by general education at the higher level. Those professions entail law, agriculture, industry, commerce, and, most emphatically, teaching. In short, the end of general education at the higher level is to provide for education and support at the primary level. The goals announced for primary education will be attained only in proportion as advanced goals are attained in higher education. General education in higher education is the cement that makes possible a credible primary or pre-collegiate education that will, in turn, assure the development of able republican citizens who will act with intelligence and faithfulness.

Not the lesser goal of cultural familiarity but the noble goal of ability to direct and form culture was the aim of general education as originally described in the official declarations of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Much has changed since that time, including the development of an official goal of providing higher education for virtually all citizens of Virginia. That may well require us to revisit the definition of general education.

Heretofore, however, we have done so only silently, accepting a tacit restatement that likens the goal of college and university education to what was previously envisioned as the goal of primary education. That may be a reasonable course to follow where ideals of access to higher education render less tenable the expectation that higher education will systematically produce “statesmen, legislators, and judges.” But two questions must flow from such a conclusion.

First, is there a successor to the former higher education, which will provide assurance of the ability to provide the newly defined primary education?

Second, do we adhere even to the more modest version of general education in our colleges and universities today?

## **General Education in Virginia’s Colleges and Universities**

Perhaps the most shocking thing a commentator could say about prevailing practices in general education in colleges and universities today, whether in Virginia or elsewhere in the United States, is that a tariff duty on foreign books would scarcely cause a ripple in our general education curricula. The pattern of offerings we discover upon review reveals little opportunity for comparative assessment with reference to the attainments of those thought most advanced.

To our credit we may say that American scholarship today is as frequently the intellectual standard as foreign scholarship. To our discredit there is little evidence that general education curricula foster much familiarity with cutting edges in scholarship, whether American or foreign.

To take the most obvious case, nowhere does there exist any general education curriculum in which the study of foreign language can be expected to foster anything more than a tourist’s gloss on a foreign language. To be sure, many a foreign language major will have discovered an interest awakening in an elementary language course intended initially only to satisfy a general education requirement. That is something gained. The intensive study of foreign languages, however, is not a growth industry in the academy in general or in Virginia in particular.

Moreover, the evolution of general education courses as mainly the most general, introductory study preparatory to initiating specialized study in a major strengthens the presumption that there is no intrinsic virtue to general education itself – it is a means to the end of specialization more often than it is a substantive contribution to a student’s understanding. Instruction in mathematics, like that in foreign languages, illustrates this ably also; indeed, a pervasive practice has emerged that isolates the handful of eventual majors in mathematics from all other students, who seldom acquire more than a sprinkling under showers effectively labeled “mathematics for the unfamiliar.”

While the Council of Higher Education’s report on general education highlights a few notable successes in Virginia, in which we take great pride, it remains true that the general picture of the American academy remains true of Virginia higher education also. As we review some of the particular findings, it will be important to keep these observations in mind, for they constitute the meaning behind the course titles.

The guiding question in assessing general education is not how comprehensive is the list of offerings at a college or university. It is far rather, how effective an analyst of the structures of government the mathematics major is and how effective an analyst of mathematics is the political science major?

As we shall see, we cannot take much encouragement about the answers to those questions from the results we have obtained. The importance of this stems from the fact that we read our results in light of the requirement that general education produce, not proficient specialists, but rather “intelligent and faithful citizens” and, to the extent possible, “statesmen, legislators, and judges.” It belongs to another forum to discuss why it is insufficient to think of “statesmen, legislators, and judges” as merely proficient specialists.

## **Characteristics of General Education Programs**

The study by the Council of Higher Education speaks of five characteristics of general education programs in Virginia.

- 1) A brief discussion of the "rationale for general education programs" conveys the declared or explicit goals of the general education programs on our campuses in the context of accreditation standards that mandate a minimum number of credits drawn from three broad areas, "humanities/fine arts, social/behavioral sciences, and natural sciences/mathematics."
- 2) The "structure of general-education programs" details the explicit requirements on each of our campuses.
- 3) The "actual course-taking patterns for 1993-97" reveal the specific accomplishments of the cohort of undergraduates that entered our institutions in 1993.
- 4) The discussion of "assessment of general education programs" narrates the efforts of our campuses to maintain adequate curricula.
- 5) "The process of change in general education programs" relates to the progress of campus oversight in general education.

### **1) Rationale for General Education Programs**

Our review of the "rationales" for our general education programs isolates four overarching themes:

- To provide foundational knowledge and basic skills to prepare the student to pursue major and professional programs;
- To enable the student to synthesize information and to make connections across disparate fields of study;
- To form a basis for the student to become an informed and productive member of society; and
- To inculcate a desire to become an active, lifelong learner.

These themes characterize in some degree all of the curricula at our public and private institutions. They vary in details and clarity, but the most important factor is that all make an explicit and public commitment to attain such objectives. In the process, some though not many draw the necessary implication, defining a conception of the "educated person."

Thirty-three percent of the public institutions and only seventeen percent of the private institutions offered an explicit definition.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute's formulation illustrates the range of concerns often conveyed in these definitions:

As we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, both continuity and change are required in higher education.

On the one hand, we must continue to foster vital links with our common cultural heritage and to inculcate crucial intellectual skills.

On the other hand, the contemporary world presents a number of critical issues with which every society must grapple.

Educated citizens in the years ahead must be able to react creatively to cultural, racial, and gender-based diversity, and to cope effectively with problems and potentialities stemming from such elements as technological advances and environmental crises.

While the varying definitions convey quite well the range and variability of conceptions of the educated person current on campuses today, the most important aspect of this phenomenon is the invitation to the public to review the stated aims and understandings of college or university leaders.

The analysis at the surface level of the published statements of our institutions, constitutes a uniquely valuable level of analysis specifically because it does signify the willingness to engage in an act of public responsibility or accountability.

It is a truism that our institutions must be able to articulate their aims to lay audiences in order to compel attention and support for their missions.

In that sense, the numerous public criticisms of general education programs (such as that of the Virginia Association of Scholars) that have emerged on the strength of reviewing catalog statements of requirements possess a unique value.

At the same time, the institutions often communicate tacit or underlying rationales. These tend to lengthen the listings of desirable attributes resulting from education and, consequently, the goals of general education programs.

The table on the following page illustrates how our institutions responded with respect to a survey of their tacit objectives.

**Table #1: Rationales for General Education Programs**

	<i>Public 4-year (N = 15)</i>	<i>Public 2-year (N = 24)</i>	<i>Private not- for-profit (N = 18)</i>	<i>Private for- profit (N = 7)</i>	<i>All insti- tutions (N = 64)</i>
Acquiring intellectual skills	15	23	18	6	62
Developing social and civic competencies and values	15	22	13	6	56
Producing an educated citizenry	15	21	13	6	55
Providing a foundation of learning	13	21	15	6	55
Developing habits of mind of a liberally educated person	14	17	17	4	52
Producing a versatile workforce	14	20	8	7	49
Integrating learning	11	18	14	6	49
Learning more about oneself	13	18	9	6	46
Transmitting cultural heritage/values	12	19	14	0	45
Cultivating personal fulfillment	13	18	11	2	44
Sampling a variety of fields	12	14	12	1	39
Creating a learning community	11	14	9	4	38
Supplementing concentration	9	11	9	2	31

This survey demonstrates substantial similarity across categories of institutions in the relative importance attached to these various rationales for general education. It also illustrates the likelihood of substantial diversity in the range of offerings that would respond to such goals.

We shall see that it is no accident that critics from all perspectives often have the sense today that general education curricula have no glue that holds them together. We may now see that a powerful reason for that is an extraordinary growth in the number of concerns – concomitant with the explosive growth in higher education in general – that colleges and universities seek to meet within the finite limits of relatively few courses or credit hours available for the purposes of general education.

Our study also reveals the effect of trying to attain the competing objectives of “breadth and depth” in general education courses. Our institutions more frequently reserve the forum of general education for breadth explorations, while seeking to build depth of understanding in the

major. That represents a movement toward trying to satisfy these competing objectives in the context of preserving adequate opportunity for the two pillars of baccalaureate education – namely, general education that students should, in principle, enjoy in common, and the special preparation for further study or careers hived off for majors or concentrations. Our analysis, we shall see shortly, strongly suggests that the specialized courses of study play a significant role in orienting the pattern of general education course taking, such that students slip at earlier and earlier stages of their study into their intended concentrations.

The significance of the last observation is that it raises some question as to how successfully the institutions pursue the learning objectives specified for general education. Most of our institutions do specify learning objectives, though a few do not.

Radford University offers a comprehensive account of learning objectives, designating six general goals and 34 specific goals for the eight clusters or disciplinary areas. The general goals are:

- Think clearly and creatively about ideas, issues, and texts both within and across academic disciplines.
- Raise relevant and insightful questions within and across academic disciplines.
- Construct logical and persuasive arguments.
- Employ a variety of research methods and styles of inquiry.
- Use appropriate computer technologies to gather and organize information, to solve problems, and to communicate ideas.
- Work with others in a shared process of inquiry and problem-solving.

In the Physical and Natural Sciences cluster, by way of illustration, the specific goals are:

- Comprehend the empirical nature of science.
- Identify scientific problems and apply scientific methods.
- Extend scientific problem-solving skills to a variety of situations.
- Relate the basic principles of science to the world at large.
- Understand the relations between science, technology, and society.

Further, the identification of learning objectives permits ready distinction between content and skill areas in the general education curriculum. For example, to write well is a skill, though often taught most effectively through a content presentation. When we surveyed the institutions concerning the distribution of their courses relative to content or skill, we found a useful template by which to assess general goals.



**Table #2: Requirements by Content Area**

	<i>Public 4-year (N = 15)</i>	<i>Public 2-year (N = 24)</i>	<i>Private not-for-profit (N = 18)</i>	<i>Private for-profit (N = 7)</i>	<i>All institutions (N = 64)</i>
Social sciences	14	23	18	4	59
Natural sciences	14	21	18		53
Mathematics	12	19	14	3	48
Health/physical education	11	20	13		44
History	11	18	12		41
Humanities	9	18	11	4	42
Literature	11	12	15		38
Communications	9	15	5	4	33
Fine arts	12	6	14		32
Foreign Languages	9	5	8		22
Other	8	3	11		22
Technology	4	12	3		19
Ethics	8	1	9		18
International Studies	3	0	6		9

**Table #3: Requirements by Skill Area**

	<i>Public 4-year (N = 15)</i>	<i>Public 2-year (N = 24)</i>	<i>Private not-for-profit (N = 18)</i>	<i>Private for-profit (N = 7)</i>	<i>All Institutions (N = 64)</i>
Writing skills	15	22	18	6	61
Mathematical reasoning/ quantitative analysis	14	23	17	6	60
Oral communication skills	12	19	13	5	49
Computer/technology skills	12	23	10	1	46
Critical thinking skills	12	15	9	5	41
Ethical reasoning skills	8	9	9	1	27
Foreign-language skills	11	5	10	0	26
Library research skills	8	11	3	4	26
Other	7	13	4	1	25

By way of content we noted that Virginia Military Institute stood alone in not requiring a social sciences content, while the University of Virginia stands alone in not having a natural science requirement as a separate area (though it does require the combined area, mathematics/natural science). Four of the public institutions (Clinch Valley College, George Mason University, Mary Washington College, and Virginia Commonwealth University), six of the community colleges, and six of the private not-for-profit institutions do not specifically require history. By way of skills, nearly all require specific training or competence in writing, while a progressive decline characterizes the percentages of those who specifically require the remaining skills, with foreign language being required in only 22 of the 64 reporting institutions.

Respecting the attainment of announced goals or objectives a critical moment is the process for monitoring or approving course offerings. Of 64 reporting institutions, half have announced specific criteria (though many appear to be implicit rather than explicit) for course offerings to meet these objectives. Among the four-year public institutions only Virginia Military Institute did not have announced criteria. Among the specific criteria, those enunciated by Old Dominion University require course proposals that “(1) explain what methods will be used to meet each of four general learning goals; (2) explain what methods will be used to ensure that the course is an academically rigorous and substantive introduction to the discipline involved; and (3) explain what methods will be used to attain the special learning goals of that disciplinary area.”

## 2) Structure of General Education Programs

This summary only offers highlights of the structures of our general education programs. Certain questions do emerge as dominant, however, and we develop these briefly. In reviewing program structures, we were interested both in the number of credits actually required and in the course formats offered. We asked institutions to identify their programs in terms of six typical structures – namely (the table below presents the results):

- A common set of required courses that all students take;
- A set of content-oriented areas with course options in each area;
- A set of skills-oriented areas with course options in each area;
- A mixture of required courses and courses that are part of the major;
- No requirements are set; and
- Other.

**Table #4: Characterization of Structure**

	<i>Public 4-year (N = 15)</i>	<i>Public 2-year (N = 24)</i>	<i>Private not-for- profit (N = 18)</i>	<i>Private for-profit (N = 7)</i>	<i>All insti- tutions (N = 64)</i>
A set of content-oriented areas with course options	10	9	15	0	34
A common set of required courses	2	4	1	7	14
A set of skills-oriented areas with course options	1	5	0	0	6
A mixture of required and major courses	0	5	0	0	5
Other	2	1	2	0	4
No requirements are set	0	0	0	0	0

Most institutions indicated a "set of content-oriented areas with course options," especially the four-year institutions, including 10 out of 15 public and 15 out of 18 private not-for-profit four-year institutions. At a distant second, institutions identified "a common set of required courses that all students take," with only Norfolk State University and Virginia Military Institute indicating this choice among public four-year institutions.

With regard to the number of credit hours required, our institutions are not less varied in their approaches. As part of their responses to the survey, the institutions reported the total number of credits required in general education. Eight of the 15 four-year public institutions reported a set number of credits in general education for all degrees. The average number of credits these eight required was 46.5. Six of them required between 48 and 52 credits. Longwood College required the fewest credits at 33, while Norfolk State University required 40, the next fewest.

The remaining seven of the public four-year institutions reported credit ranges, with the lower end of the range applicable to students who earn degrees outside of the arts and sciences (e.g., in engineering or health) or to students who come to the institution with a demonstrated proficiency. For example, at Virginia Commonwealth University, students in some professional schools (e.g., health and business) can earn as few as 31 credits to meet general education requirements, while students in the College of Humanities and Science must earn 63 credits.

Some institutions have a range even for students within the same unit, based upon a demonstrated proficiency. For example, the College of William and Mary provides for a range of 41 to 70 credits, the precise number depending upon such factors as what the student has had in terms of foreign languages and Advanced Placement credits, whether a course satisfies more than one requirement, and so forth. At the University of Virginia, we find 30 credits from the major included within the 74 to 80 general education credits, which means that its range is really 44 to 50.

**Table #5: Total Number of Credits Required by Public Institutions**

	<i>Set number of credits required</i>	<i>Minimum in range of credits</i>	<i>Maximum in range of credits</i>
<i>PUBLIC 4-YEAR</i>			
Christopher Newport University	51		
Clinch Valley College	52		
College of William and Mary		41	70
George Mason University		33	63
James Madison University		40	43
Longwood College	33		
Mary Washington College	49		
Norfolk State University	40		
Old Dominion University		42	54
Radford University	50		
University of Virginia		44	50
Virginia Commonwealth University		31	63
Virginia Military Institute	49		
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University		39	41
Virginia State University	48		
<i>PUBLIC 2-YEAR</i>			
Richard Bland College	48		
Virginia Community College System (transfer programs)		37	46
VCCS (non-transfer programs)	15		

Twelve of the 18 private not-for-profit institutions reported that they required for all degrees a determinate number of credits in general education. On average, they required 50 credits. Mary Baldwin College required the most at 68, while Hollins University required the least at 32. The remaining six private not-for-profit institutions reported credit ranges, with Bridgewater College (58 to 64) and Lynchburg College (58 to 63) at the high end, as shown in the following table.

**Table #6: Total Number of Credits Required by Private Institutions**

	<i>Set number of credits required</i>	<i>Minimum in range of credits</i>	<i>Maximum in range of credits</i>
<i>PRIVATE NOT-FOR-PROFIT</i>			
Averett College		39	58
Bridgewater College		58	64
College of Health Sciences		32	60
Eastern Mennonite University	49		
Emory and Henry College	39		
Hampden-Sydney College	52		
Hollins University	32		
Liberty University	55		
Lynchburg College		58	63
Mary Baldwin College	68		
Marymount University	54		
Randolph-Macon College	50		
Randolph-Macon Woman's College	42		
Saint Paul's College	57		
Sweet Briar College		43	45
University of Richmond	46		
Virginia Intermont College		48	49
Washington and Lee University	56		
<i>PRIVATE FOR-PROFIT</i>			
Bryant & Stratton College	32		
Dominion College	32		
ECPI - Richmond	15		
ECPI - Roanoke		15	17
ECPI - Virginia Beach/Hampton		15	17
National Business College	24		
World College	31		

As I have pointed out, the number of general education credits required will often vary with the degrees offered. While 11 of the public four-year institutions report no such variations, George Mason University, Mary Washington College, the University of Virginia, and Virginia Commonwealth University do apply higher credit standards to programs in the arts and sciences – requiring higher credit standards than those in applied fields. It is appropriate to note, however, that credits required for graduation with applied degrees also vary across programs.

As a general rule, in our public four-year institutions (except for the two with substantial common requirements and excluding physical education), few courses other than writing are required of all students. In the private not-for-profit four-year institutions, slightly more courses in the arts and sciences are required of all students. Significantly, no institution, apart from the community colleges and the private for-profit institutions, lists any course in mathematics as a requirement for all students, and only Saint Paul's College lists courses in mathematics as required for all students in arts and sciences. Some explanation is in order.

It is a certainty that competence in mathematics is required for many programs in our colleges and universities. The means of attaining or demonstrating that competency, however, vary greatly and are sometimes specific to the particular program of study in which a student pursues a major. Thus, much instruction in mathematics takes place in relation to the respective disciplines.

At the same time, the absence of an identified general education component in mathematics does open the door to completion of baccalaureate degrees without instruction in mathematics. This will be true even at the University of Virginia, the only public four-year institution without a specific credit requirement in mathematics (mathematics falls in the combined category of mathematics/natural science). While many and perhaps most of the University's students will arrive with substantial ability in mathematics, and several will study mathematics at advanced levels, it will remain true that some will complete degree programs with neither college level study nor the requirement to demonstrate college level competence in mathematics.

In other subject areas, roughly half of the public four-year institutions require study in history, while 12 of the 18 private not-for-profit institutions and 17 of the 24 public two-year institutions do so. None of the institutions specified previously that this history must be satisfied with a course in American history, although James Madison University did initiate an American history requirement in 1998, to become effective in 1999, and Virginia Polytechnic has just adopted a United States history requirement for future years. Half of the private not-for-profit institutions and two-thirds of the public four-year institutions required some credit in foreign language study, but all institutions allow for demonstration of proficiency to satisfy this requirement.

*[NOTE: Tables #10, #11 & #12, further illustrating this section of the text, appear at end of the document because of formatting.]*

It would ordinarily be of interest to review course sequencing in a curriculum of general education. Our study, however, provides results that are less than clear with respect to this issue.

It appears that the reporting institutions responded in fairly idiosyncratic ways to the inquiry, rendering comparisons more tenuous. In general, it appears that general education courses serve as pre-requisites for further study at a fairly minimal rate, on average only 27 percent of the courses at all the institutions serve this role.

On the other hand, a much higher percentage of the course offerings in general education seems to require pre-requisites, 43 percent on average. This confusing finding will require further analysis. One might tentatively speculate, however, that the institutions have not so much misreported, as that we have isolated an effect of the attraction of general education courses into majors. This would imply, further, degrees of specialization in courses offered for general education beyond what would normally and reasonably be expected.

A final structural consideration is the provision for opting out that institutions provide. In the context in which the number of options for substituting or eluding the general education requirement is large, the published requirement will bear decreasing relationship to the actual experiences of students (whether positively or negatively).

In our study the great majority of institutions allow students to "place out" of general education courses, whether by examination or prior study. Only five of 61 institutions report no provision for "placing out." At most of the public four-year and private not-for-profit institutions, students may "place out" of at most one quarter of the general education courses. Of the balance of the public four-year institutions, three exceed that average by only one or two percentage

points, and the last, Old Dominion University, allows a “placing-out” option for 100 percent of its general education curriculum. The number of students who avail themselves of this option appears to be reasonably small, although several institutions report wide ranges of frequency (from one to 70 percent). Naturally, the extent to which this option is exercised more frequently imposes an obligation of assessment that can demonstrate the attainment of the goals aimed at by general education through other means.

### **3) Actual Course Taking Patterns for 1993-97**

The foregoing considerations should make clear why it is important to assess actual course taking patterns for undergraduate students. Not only do explicit requirements for general education curricula vary among institutions, but also within each institution there are complex interrelationships among explicit and tacit requirements, program structures, course designs, and criteria for fulfilling requirements.

For the purposes of this review, we identified a cohort of first-year students who entered in fall, 1993, had completed at least 90 credits at the institution they entered, and who were enrolled through 1996-97. Thus, we eliminate students who had dropped out of school early, who had transferred to another institution, or who were taking so few courses each semester that they had not yet completed at least three-fourths of their program requirements.

The general education curriculum completed by this cohort of students may not be the curriculum the respective institution enforces today. This is particularly true for several institutions that have made major changes in their general education programs since fall, 1993. Among these are the College of William and Mary, James Madison University, Mary Washington College, Old Dominion University, and Virginia Commonwealth University. Moreover, the number of courses from which students may select to meet their general education requirements affects this analysis. At most institutions, students may select from a large number of courses. At the University of Virginia students may select from more than 1,300 courses, but we have cited only the lesser number from which they commonly choose. Given this type of structure, one might expect students’ choices to be widely distributed throughout the range of available courses. To the contrary, however, they choose rather narrowly, a small percentage of the available courses enrolling by far the larger number of students.

What are the courses most commonly taken, and the percentages of the cohort enrolled in each?

Although one might expect that all students would take a required course, very few courses are actually taken by a 100 percent of students, whether because the students are placed out or are exempt for other reasons. We find in only a few cases between 90 and 99 percent of the students enrolled in only 22 courses at the public institutions and 32 courses at the private not-for-profit institutions, as shown in the following two tables.

**Table #7: Courses Taken by 90-99% of Cohort  
Public Institutions**

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James Madison University	Reading and Composition II
Longwood College	Total Fitness Through Exercise
	Composition and Literary Analysis
Norfolk State University	Communications Skills I and II
Radford University	Introductory Psychology
	Reading, Writing, and Research Skills
Richard Bland College	Writing and Research
	Introduction to Literary Genres
Virginia Commonwealth University	Composition and Rhetoric I and II
Virginia Community College System	College Composition
Virginia Military Institute	Speech
	Boxing
	Drug and Alcohol Abuse Awareness
	Principles of Physical Conditioning
	English Composition I and II
Virginia State University	Reading and Writing About Literature I
	Personal Health
	Freshman Writing

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**Table #8: Courses Taken by 90-99% of Cohort  
Private Not-for-Profit Institutions**

Averett College	History of Western Civilization
Bridgewater College	Composition and Literary Forms
Hampden-Sydney College	Principles and Practice of Writing I and II
Hampton University	The Individual and Life
	Humanities I and II
	World Civilization II
	English
	Health Education
Liberty University	Contemporary Issues I and II
	Evangelism and Christian Life
	Theology Survey I and II
	Philosophy and Contemporary Ideas
	Composition and Literature
	Old Testament Survey
Lynchburg College	History of Civilization I and II
	Freshman English
Marymount University	General Psychology
	Composition I
Randolph-Macon College	Europe: Renaissance to 1815
	Europe Since 1815
Randolph-Macon Woman's College	Colloquium
Roanoke College	Values and Responsible Life
	Writing Course II
Saint Paul's College	World History Since 1650
	United States History to 1877
	Introduction to Philosophy
Sweet Briar College	Strategies for Wellness

In order to identify a de facto general education program we have set a level of "high commonality" at seventy percent and report the results in the following table. Using this proxy we identify a proxy for "common learning experience" that leaves only the substantive question of the match to general education requirements in order to assess the performance of our institutions.



**Table #9: Average Number of Credits Taken in High-, Medium- and Low-Commonality Courses at Public and Private Not-for-Profit Institutions**

	<i>High- commonality courses (70-100% of cohort)</i>	<i>Medium- commonality courses (50-69% of cohort)</i>	<i>Low-commonality courses (30-49% of cohort)</i>	<i>High, Medium, and Low commonality (30-100% of cohort)</i>
<i>PUBLIC 4-YEAR AND 2-YEAR</i>				
Christopher Newport University	12	27	38	77
Clinch Valley College	21	19	27	67
College of William and Mary	0	9	20	29
George Mason University	9	13	13	35
James Madison University	6	12	33	51
Longwood College	8	16	30	54
Mary Washington College	6	10	39	55
Norfolk State University	18	24	12	54
Old Dominion University	6	15	12	33
Radford University	12	20	36	68
University of Virginia	0	6	7	13
Virginia Commonwealth University	6	6	15	27
Virginia Military Institute	11	16	30.5	57.5
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & S. U.	3	10	22	35
Virginia State University	15	18	25	58
Richard Bland College	23	11	8	42
Virginia Community College System	6	9	17	32
<i>PRIVATE NOT-FOR-PROFIT</i>				
Averett College	18	12	37	67
Bridgewater College	10	21	32	63
Eastern Mennonite University	0	9	25	34
Hampden-Sydney College	18	20	25	63
Hampton University	21	9	15	45
Hollins University	0	8	12	20
Liberty University	28	6	19	53
Lynchburg College	25	6	24	55
Marymount University	16	9	28	53
Randolph-Macon College	12	10	45	67
Roanoke College	28	12	36	76
Randolph-Macon Woman's College	3	6	24	33
Saint Paul's College	19	6	3	28
University of Richmond	2	3	22	27
Sweet Briar College	4	6	12	22

Only four institutions (the College of William and Mary, the University of Virginia, Eastern Mennonite University, and Hollins University) had no credit hours in courses taken by 70 percent or more of the cohort.

Further analyzed by subject matter, the "common learning experience" occurs almost entirely in writing or writing-related courses.

At five of the institutions, students took some form of mathematics (including statistics) in high commonality courses (Christopher Newport University, Clinch Valley College, Norfolk State University, Richard Bland College, and Roanoke College).

Social sciences provided high commonality enrollments at several institutions.

Natural sciences provided no high commonality enrollments (except for Christopher Newport University and Norfolk State University), and no science course attracted as much as 30

percent of the cohort at three of the public four-year, and three of the private not-for-profit institutions. Moreover, at two institutions (William and Mary and Averett College) Psychology as a Natural Science was the science course most commonly taken by the cohort.

Finally, there was broad enrollment in several foreign languages at many of the institutions.

The *de facto* general education curriculum, therefore, looks mainly like writing, social science, and, to a lesser extent, foreign languages at most our institutions. A wide variety of humanities courses are also included, but with no fundamental commonality.

#### 4) Assessment in General Education

Whatever the publicly stated goals or the actual practices of the general education programs in our institutions, assessment will be key to determining their adequacy ultimately. Unless expectations are made explicit, high standards set for performance, and systematic analysis and interpretation of evidence employed to determine the match between performance and expectations, not much can be concluded regarding the accomplishments even of attractive general education programs.

Fortunately, Virginia initiated its assessment program in 1987. The Council of Higher Education asked each public institution to define both what it wanted students to know as a result of its general education program, and also, how it expected to determine whether it had been successful. Many institutions struggled in their initial efforts to respond.

Virginia's institutions were not alone.

Across the United States, institutions and agencies involved reported that assessment of general education was more difficult than was assessment of other academic programs, in part because institutions had difficulty making explicit what they expected from general education curricula. This problem was only compounded by the reality of contested interpretations. For example, a goal that states, "upon completion of the general education program, students should be able to think clearly and creatively about ideas, issues, and texts both within and across academic disciplines," may have vastly different applications depending on the interpretations that spawn it.

Through early assessment practices and findings, several Virginia institutions found that their general education programs were ill defined and lacking in focus.

Sometimes such findings stimulated changes in general education programs. For example, James Madison University's early efforts led to a "total redesign" of the core liberal arts curriculum, which is now called the General Education Program. Moreover, James Madison has embedded assessment into its cross-disciplinary structure.

Virginia institutions have frequently been recognized for unusual strength in this regard during the re-accreditation visits from the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges. Their struggles with the assessment initiatives have provided nearly a decade-long experience in meeting the accreditation criterion of "institutional effectiveness." More importantly still, this experience leaves most Virginia colleges or universities better prepared today to respond to incentives and encouragements to fashion general education programs that truly fulfill the goals envisioned.

Our institutions employ diverse assessment strategies, ranging from standardized examinations to class grades to systematic review of student learning outcomes and alumni surveys. Bridgewater College employs a particularly notable example of portfolio assessment in its processes. Though somewhat less ambitiously, Virginia State University and the College of William and Mary also employ student portfolios.

Whatever the array of assessment tools, we may say, in general, that the institutions that have implemented assessment most systematically have also been those that have advanced farthest in refining general education programs.

The principal advantage of assessment is that it can drive curriculum improvements.

Our review of general education not only points to existing practices but, to the same extent, participates in the general embrace of continuous quality assessment spawned by the “Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning,” which the Council of Higher Education developed using the model of the American Association for Higher Education.

In recent years, Christopher Newport University reviewed writing samples of a random group of graduating seniors and found too many of them lacking still the proficiency levels expected. The University increased its writing requirements as a result (as the foregoing analysis illustrates), and after three years it noted improved abilities to compose and summarize texts, use correct sentence structure, and make critical responses to ideas.

Other institutions also made a number of changes. Virginia State University assigned first-year writing courses to senior faculty members and reallocated three new positions to mathematics. Radford University reported that assessment had led to curricular changes, changes in course sequencing and pre-requisites, and the development of internships.

In general, the public institutions have integrated assessment into their planning and evaluation loops, benefiting from earlier Council policy guidance. This enables them, even beyond the levels of their private counterparts, to respond to renewed calls for curriculum improvement.

## **5) Process of Change in General Education Programs**

Without exploring the details of provisions for change, we may say that it is by now a built-in expectation in Virginia’s public institutions that systems and processes to sponsor change are integral to the operation of dynamic institutions.

General education programs participate fully in that dynamism. For this reason, the sometime criticisms of general education programs occur not within a vacuum but within a system of higher education that is now predisposed to criticize itself. Profiting from the momentum for change wherever it arises, they responded to our survey with a high degree of consciousness of the need to change. We asked them what motivates the reviews of general education that they are undertaking or plan soon to undertake, and all but two of the four-year institutions pinpointed “broad concerns about general education.”

The direction of recent changes has been to introduce broad coverage across basic disciplines, greater rigor in foundation classes, narrowing the range of student choices, and presenting

a more coherent, structured, and skill-oriented curriculum. We find different emphases and even directions in different institutions, and there remain some yet to begin meaningful reform of their general education programs. The Council’s study results detail these across all of the reporting institutions in all of the categories of higher education in Virginia.

The next stage of analysis for the institutions, in light of our analysis of the patterns of actual enrollments, will be to weigh program accomplishments in the light of program professions.

If prior assessment efforts may serve as a guide, we can reliably expect that the next decade will be no less distinguished by significant reforms in general education than was the past decade.

What will be of greatest value in the next era of reform, however, will be the fact that the next wave of change will represent a continuing momentum, and not merely an awakening from slumbering neglect.

Essentially all institutions, public and private, report that comprehensive reviews of their general education programs were either underway currently or about to begin. In the prior era of reform, institutions were most moved by perceived incoherence in the former general education program, a need to improve basic skills in students, changes in pedagogy, and an urge to meet imminent workforce demands. Many of those concerns will persist into the next era of reform, but it may be fairly foreseen at this stage that institutions will be no less moved by the desire to attain some of the nobler goals cited at the opening of this discussion.

While the fundamentally individual skills of writing, calculating, and navigating changing career terrains will always remain of prime importance, there will be a qualitative advance in general education programs when they can aim with equal certainty to advance “power, morals, order, and happiness” in the society.

To these ends we require to amplify individual skills with informed social skills. General education also seeks a public good.

*[Three tables follow.]*

**Table #10: Required Credit Hours by Subject Area,  
Public 4-Year Institutions**

	Computer liter- acy/ Technology	Critical Thinking	Ethical Reasoning	Fine Arts	Foreign Languages	Health/P.E.	History	Humanities		
Christopher Newport University	0	3	3	0	6-12	2	6	6		
Clinch Valley College	0	0	0	3	6	1	0	3		
College of William and Mary	0	0	3-4	6	4-16	2	12	17-23		
George Mason University	0	0	0	3	12	0	0	0		
James Madison University	0	3	0	3	0	3	0	3		
Longwood College	0	0	1	4	3	3	3	0		
Mary Washington College	0	0	0	3	12	2	0	0		
Norfolk State University	0	0	0	3	0	3	3	6		
Old Dominion University	3-6	3	3	3	6	0	6	12		
Radford University	0	0	0	6	6	3	6	9		
University of Virginia	0	0	0	0	14	0	3	0		
Virginia Commonwealth Univer- sity	0-6	0-3	0-3	0	0-8	0	0	1.5-6		
Virginia Military Institute	0	0	0	0	0	4	6	0		
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and S.U.	0	0	0-6	1-3	0	0	0-6	0-6		
Virginia State University	3	0	0	0	0	4	0	12		
	International Studies	Library Research	Literature	Mathematics/ Quant. analy- sis	Natural science	Oral Communica- tions	Social Sciences	Writing	Total hours required	
Christopher Newport University	0	0	0	3	7	0	6	6	51	
Clinch Valley College	0	0	3	6	8	0	9	6	52	
College of William and Mary	0	4	3	4	8	4	8	7-8	41-70	
George Mason University	0	0	6	3-4	8	3	12	9	33-66	
James Madison University	0	0	3	3-4	7	3	9	3-6	40-43	
Longwood College	3	0	3	3	4	3	3	6	33	
Mary Washington College	0	0	3	6	8	0	6	3	49	
Norfolk State University	0	0	6	3	7	0	3	3	40	
Old Dominion University	0	0	3	3	12	3	6	6	42-54	
Radford University	0	0	3	6	8	0	18	6	50	
University of Virginia	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	6-7	44-50	
Virginia Commonwealth Univer- sity	0-3	0	0-3	0-11	0-23	0-3	0-18	6-12	31-63	
Virginia Military Institute	0	0	0	6	8	1	0	12	49	
Virginia Polytechnic Inst. and S.U.	3	0	0	6	8	6	0-6	9	39-41	
Virginia State University	0	0	0	6	8	0	12	6	48	

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**Other requirements**


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Clinch Valley	6 credits in 'Western heritage'
College of William and Mary	4 credits in 'Study of non-Western culture; 2 hours in 'Artistic process.' All general education courses include critical thinking. The required 4-credit freshman seminar includes oral communication and library research.
George Mason	0 to 6 credits in 'Non-Western Culture'; 0-6 credits in 'Philosophy/Religious Studies'; some categories overlap. Computer literacy/technology, critical thinking, and writing are taught across the curriculum
Longwood	Parts of 33 required credits in 'Creative thinking', 'Understanding implications of knowledge', 'Understanding diverse perspectives', and 'Understanding inter-connections'
Mary Washington	6 credits in "Western Civilization"
Old Dominion	6 to 12 credits in upper-division requirements
University of Virginia	3 credits in 'Non-Western perspectives'; 12 hours in 'Math-Natural Sciences'; 6 hours in the 'Humanities, Fine Arts, and Literature.' The university teaches some concepts across the curriculum.
Virginia Commonwealth	The College of Humanities and Sciences requires 8 - 9 credits in Humanities and 3 credits in its Urban category
Virginia Polytechnic Inst	6 credits in 'Society and human behavior'

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**Table #11: Required Credit Hours by Subject Area,  
Public 2-Year Institutions**

	<i>Comp. literacy/ Technology</i>	<i>Critical Thinking</i>	<i>Ethical Reasoning</i>	<i>Fine Arts</i>	<i>Foreign Languages</i>	<i>Health/P.E.</i>	<i>History</i>	<i>Humanities</i>
Blue Ridge	0	0	0	0	0	2	6	0
Central Virginia	3	0	0	0	0	2	6	6
Dabney S. Lancaster	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	6
Danville	3	0	0	0	0	2	3-6	6
Eastern Shore	3	0	0	0	0	2-3	6	6
Germanda	3	0	0	0	0	2	6	6
J. Sargeant Reynolds	2-3	0	0	0	3-14	2	6	6
John Tyler	3	0	0	0	0	2	3	6
Lord Fairfax	3-4	0	0	0	0	2	0	6
Mountain Empire	3	0	0	0	8	2	6	6
New River	3	0	0	0	0	2	6	6
Northern Virginia	0	0	0	0	0-6	2	0-3	6
Patrick Henry	3	0	0	3	0	2	6	3
Paul D. Camp	3	0	0	0	0	2	6	6
Piedmont Virginia	3	0	0	0	0-6	2	0	6
Rappahannock	3	9	0	0	0	2	0	6
Southside Virginia	3	0	6	0	6-8	2	0	6
Southwest Virginia	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	6
Tidewater	0	0	0	0	0-6	2	6	6
Thomas Nelson	0	0	0	0	0-6	2	6	6
Virginia Highlands	3	3	0	3	0-14	2-3	6	3
Virginia Western	3	0	0	3	6	2	6	3
Wytheville	0	0	0	6	0	2	6	6
Richard Bland	3	20	3	3	0	4	6	6

	<i>International Studies</i>	<i>Library Research</i>	<i>Literature</i>	<i>Mathematics/ Quant. analy- sis</i>	<i>Natural science</i>	<i>Oral Communica- tions</i>	<i>Social Sciences</i>	<i>Writing</i>	<i>Total hours required</i>
Blue Ridge	0	0	6	6	8	3	6	6	37-46
Central Virginia	0	0	0	6	8	3	12	6	37-46
Dabney S. Lancas- ter	0	0	0	3	8	3	12	6	37-46
Danville	0	0	0	3-6	8	0	12	6	37-46
Eastern Shore	0	0	6	3-14	8-16	3	12	6	37-46
Germanna	0	0	0	6	8	0	12	6	37-46
J. Sargeant Rey- nolds	0	0	0-6	3-14	8-24	3	6-12	6	37-46
John Tyler	0	1	3	6	8	0	12	6	37-46
Lord Fairfax	0	1	0	3	8	3	12	6	37-46
Mountain Empire	0	0	6	6	8	3	12	6	37-46
New River	0	0	3	6	8	3	12	6	37-46
Northern Virginia	0	0	0	6	8	3	9-12	6	37-46
Patrick Henry	0	0	0	6	8	3	6	6	37-46
Paul D. Camp	0	0	0	6	8	3	12	6	37-46
Piedmont Virginia	0	0	0	3	8	0	12	6	37-46
Rappahannock	0	4	0	3-6	8	3	12	6	37-46
Southside Virginia	0	0	6	6	8	0	12	6	37-46
Southwest Vir- ginia	0	0	0	6	8	0	12	6	37-46
Tidewater	0	0	0	6	8	3	12	6	37-46
Thomas Nelson	0	0	0	6	8	0	12	6	37-46
Virginia High- lands	0	0	6	6	8	3	12	6	37-46
Virginia Western	0	0	6	3-9	8	3	6-12	6	37-46
Wytheville	0	0	6	6	8	3	12	6	37-46
Richard Bland	0	0	3	6	8	3	6	6	48



**Table #12: Required Credit Hours by Subject Area,  
Private Not-for-Profit Institutions**

	<i>Comp. literacy/ Technology</i>	<i>Critical Thinking</i>	<i>Ethical Reasoning</i>	<i>Fine Arts</i>	<i>Foreign Languages</i>	<i>Health/P.E .</i>	<i>History</i>	<i>Humanities</i>
Averett	0	0	0	6	4-14	0	6	0
Bridgewater	0	3	1-4	3	3-12	2	3	6
C of Health Sciences	1-4	0	3	0	0	3-6	0	6-9
Eastern Mennonite	0	0	5	0	0	2	0	9
Emory and Henry	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	3
Hampden-Sydney	0	0	0	3	6	0	3	21
Hollins	4	0	0	8	0	0	0	8
Liberty	0	0	2	3	0	0	3	0
Lynchburg	0	0	0	6	3-9	3	6	12-18
Mary Baldwin	3	0	0	9	0	2	0	9
Marymount	0	0	3	0	0	2	3	9
Randolph-Macon	3	0	6	3	3-12	2	6	0
Randolph-Macon Woman's	0	0	0	3	3-6	1	3	0
Saint Paul's	3	3	6	3	0	3	6	6
Sweet Briar	3	3	0	3	6-12	2	0	0
University of Richmond	0	6	0	3	6-12	2	3	0
Virginia Intermont	3	0	3	3-6	0	2	6	0
Washington and Lee	0	0	12	12	16	5	12	0

	<i>International Studies</i>	<i>Library Research</i>	<i>Literature</i>	<i>Mathemat- ics/ Quant. analysis</i>	<i>Natural science</i>	<i>Oral Communi- cations</i>	<i>Social Sciences</i>	<i>Writing</i>	<i>Total hours required</i>
Averett	0	0	6	3-6	4-8	0	9	3	39-58
Bridgewater	0	1	3	3	8	3	9	3	58-64
C of Health Sciences	0	0	3-6	3-9	8-40	0	3-18	6	32-60
Eastern Mennonite	9	0	0	3	4	2	3	3	49
Emory and Henry	3	0	4	3-4	4	1	3	3	39
Hampden-Sydney	0	0	3	4	10	0	9	0	52
Hollins	0	0	0	4	4	0	8	4	32
Liberty	0	0	3	3	4	3	6	8	55
Lynchburg	0	0	3-6	3-6	16-Aug	0	6	6	58-63
Mary Baldwin	6	0	0	3	9	3	9	9	68
Marymount	0	0	3	6	4	0	9	9	54
Randolph-Macon	0	0	6	6	8	6	6	6	50
Randolph-Macon Woman's	0	0	3	3	4	0	3	3	42
Saint Paul's	0	2	6	6	6	3	6	6	57
Sweet Briar	3	0	6	0	6	3	6	12	43-45
University of Richmond	0	0	3	3	8	3	3	3	46
Virginia Intermont	0	0	6	3-6	4-8	3	6	6	48-49
Washington and Lee	0	0	6	4-8	4-8	0	9	3	56

*Other requirements*

Averett	6credits in 'Religion/Philosophy'
Bridgewater	6 credits in 'World Cultures'; 2 hours in 'Wellness'
C of Health Sciences	1 to 4 credits in 'Interdisciplinary Studies'
Eastern Mennonite	6 credits in 'Christian Faith'
Emory and Henry	3 credits in 'Religion, and 6 credits in Western Traditions
Liberty	14 credits in 'Religion'; 3 hours in 'Philosophy'; 2 hours in 'Apologetics'
Lynchburg	2 credits in senior symposium
Mary Baldwin	3 credits in 'Women's Studies'
Randolph-Macon Women's	3 credits in Philosophy or Religion
Sweet Briar	3 credits in Non-Western Studies