

General Education at Queensborough

January 26, 2012

Presentation by Dr. Karen B. Steele, Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs

Let's imagine you are one of those still mythical creatures from another universe and you drop down, David Bowie like, blue contact lenses in place, into a meeting of the Queensborough Community College faculty in hot discussion. You hear terms like "general education," "common core," "liberal arts and sciences," "disciplines," "faculty prerogative," "learning outcomes," "major requirements," "academic rigor," and "course objectives." You've read your briefing papers so you know you are not at a presidential debate, but you wonder what language these people are speaking. Even though you don't understand the topic, you can see they are passionately engaged, so you look around for someone on the sidelines who might interpret for you.

I decided to start my remarks this way, because I was thinking about the audience – not everyone here has been a faculty member, or at Queensborough, since 1980, or 1995, or 2002, or even 2007 – key dates for General Education at Queensborough; not so many have revised or designed academic programs or even written new courses, let alone considered a large scale reconfiguration of half of the required courses for most of the academic programs on a campus. All of us as teachers have asked, what are the most important things for my students to learn this semester and how can I help them learn them; a smaller group have grappled with the question, what are the most important things for all of our students to learn over the course of their 60 plus credit program at the college, and what should all of the students, regardless of their major, be able to do?

And these are, of course, the questions: what should all of the students learn and be able to do as a result of studying with us through at least 30 credits worth (or at least 20 credits for AAS

students) of liberal arts and sciences courses that we as a College have decided will give them the best foundation for their continued studies, careers, and future life.

Queensborough faculty grappled with these questions in 1980 when a Task Force was formed to decide on the liberal arts and sciences core requirements for AA, AS, and AAS programs. (In all cases the lists included more than the minimum NYS required $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, and $\frac{1}{3}$ of the total credits.) *The 1980 Liberal Arts and Sciences Cores are based on a disciplinary course distribution model.* I believe it is true that most if not all of QCC's degree programs prior to the mid nineties required SP-211 Speech Communication as well as Health Education and Physical Education. SP-211 has been categorized here as a humanities course, and HE and PE courses, which are not Liberal Arts and Sciences courses (except for PE-711) have been listed in our catalog as part of the General Education requirements for degree programs.

In 1995, when the City University of New York required that the base number of credits for Associate Degree Programs be dropped from 64 to 60 (following trends at a number of other university systems), a representative task force of QCC faculty and administrators led the review of all the degree programs and decisions were made on a college-wide basis about what would be dropped from each curriculum. The revised cores and the revised curricula were of course brought to the Academic Senate Curriculum Committee and then to the full Senate for approval. The four credits that were dropped included a few courses that were judged to be outdated, but most were from health and physical education and humanities electives, including speech. If you look at the current degree programs at Queensborough, you will see that Health and Physical Education courses were retained in about half the programs, because the College felt that these courses were important for the students' whole education; speech is required in some programs and in others it is paired with a humanities elective. Every degree program was revised in 1995.

In 1999, under a mandate from Middle States, our regional accrediting agency, Queensborough joined the national discussion about Assessment and student learning outcomes. Over several years the faculty wrote curricular objectives for all degree and certificate programs, and course

objectives and learning outcomes for all courses. (Some of these would now be judged “drafts,” and some courses never quite made it to the writing table.) The College’s first Statement of Educational Objectives for all degree graduates was drafted by the Ad Hoc Assessment Committee, discussed across the campus, and then sent to the Curriculum Committee and approved by the Academic Senate in May 2002. The Statement was placed in the College Catalog right after the Mission Statement, and the objectives were integrated into the assessment section of the academic program review process.

Three years later the Senate appointed a Special Committee to review the Educational Objectives – they were revised to be more easily understood, and the Committee wrote sample learning outcomes for each of the ten objectives. The revised Educational Objectives statement was approved by the Senate in May 2007; it appears in our College Catalog and is posted on the Assessment website.

I would like to emphasize here that the impetus for this review and revision came from the faculty, in the same way that it was the faculty on the College Advisory Planning Committee who proposed the most recent serious review and revision of the College’s Mission Statement.

It is important to note that Queensborough’s Educational Objectives were envisioned to be possible to be met even by AAS degree graduates, who had fewer liberal arts and sciences credits, because each of the ten objectives was addressed by at least one course in each curriculum. For example, because EN-102 is required for all degree programs, students have the opportunity to meet the College’s tenth objective, “apply aesthetic and intellectual criteria in the evaluation or creation of works in the humanities or the arts.” *I want to emphasize a point here: Queensborough’s AA, AS, and AAS Liberal Arts and Sciences cores are based on a disciplinary distribution model; in contrast, the Educational Objectives are based on learning outcomes. The College’s approach to General Education has been cross disciplinary; while certain objectives may only be explicitly addressed in one course in a degree program (like EN-102 above), other objectives are addressed in multiple courses and in the major course as well as in the Liberal Arts and Sciences core.*

During the early 2000s, General Education was being discussed widely at CUNY and across the nation. In Spring 2003 Queensborough was in the first group of six CUNY colleges to join the CUNY General Education Project, led by Judith Summerfield, then at the Central Office. There were faculty and administrator groups that initially met separately, then together. I was lucky to be Queensborough's administrator and Linda Stanley and Peter Gray were the faculty representatives.

Quickly there was an opportunity for each of the colleges to apply for funds to expand the general education inquiry on our own campuses, and Queensborough launched a group that read, discussed, debated and proposed over several years. This group was active in proposing and supporting some of our current pedagogical initiatives, including ePortfolio, learning communities, project based learning, and the notion of cornerstone/milestone/capstone as a paradigm for marking student development. Eventually, the University joined the funding for General Education with WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) and USIP (University Summer Immersion Program) funding to create CUE (Coordinated Undergraduate Education); a **coherent general education** entered the University's PMP (Performance Management Process) goals and targets for all the Colleges, and it was included in the University's four-year Master Plan. All the colleges eventually joined the General Education Project, and the annual CUNY General Education Conferences in May were established, with Queensborough hosting the second one. A book was published in 2007: Reclaiming the Public University: Conversations on General and Liberal Education, edited by Judith Summerfield and Crystal Benedicks, and including a couple of articles written by Queensborough faculty.

The CUNY General Education Project of the mid-2000's looked for "common ground" among the colleges but not for a common curriculum. The discussions both at Queensborough and at CUNY Gen Ed meetings were probing and collegial, and *they were very much student centered*. The focus was on getting students to make intellectual connections among their courses and develop habits of mind that would help them succeed in the academic environment. We wanted students to feel they are a part of a community of learners and to recognize their role at the college "not just as knowledge consumers but also as knowledge makers."

Fast forward a few years; add increasing national and state pressure for accountability (Spellings Commission, state legislators), budget restrictions, increasing integration of the University through system wide contracts, technology (Blackboard, CUNYfirst), differentiation of admission standards among the CUNY colleges, raising the bar on CUNY placement exams, the persistent perception by some University faculty that community college students and courses are not competitive with “native” senior college students and courses, an explosion of institutional data on student performance at the macro level, and nationwide attention to graduation as a demonstrable return on public investment .

We have arrived at a new stage of General Education discussion and structure, with an aggressive timetable to create a Common Core of 30 credits of liberal arts and sciences across the University. Some of the criteria seem to be evolving a bit – or at least they are being defined as faculty dig in to the work and ask questions. As we know from our discussions at the most recent Campus Conversation, the new core categories and learning outcomes are a pretty close fit with Queensborough’s Educational Objectives. ***But one of the biggest challenges we face in coming weeks is to peer around the disciplinary distribution model and look more closely at our introductory liberal arts and sciences courses through the prism of the University’s Common Core categories.*** Our best guess is that there will be adjustments in some curricula, and all the program listings in our catalog will be revised. Many of our liberal arts and sciences courses will need to be examined in light of the Common Core criteria, and learning outcomes will need to be revised or added. Most of all, the College faculty will need to be in considered, cross college dialogue about the courses we select for each of the eight Common Core categories and what impact those choices will have on our degree programs and the whole education of our students.

Fortunately, we have excellent faculty members who are already engaged in the Pathways initiative at all stages of the work. The Academic Senate has formed a Special Committee that has already been working, and the College Curriculum Committee has sent out advance parties. We have had LIVELY debates and will continue, I am sure. As you will see in the next presentation, Dr. Lorena Ellis, Professor in Foreign Languages and Literatures has agreed to

serve as Campus Liaison for Implementation, and Dean Arthur Corradetti will work with her as a Co-Coordinator. They will give you an update on the implementation processes and the timetable.

Thank you for your attention.