

Eleven Reasons for not adopting the Task Force General Education Proposal

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What follows raises questions about the Task Force proposal which primarily are about the proposal as an educational proposal. There are obviously other issues of both a practical and theoretical nature with the proposal. Here I address only issues related to the concept of being educated.

1. **What NEASC reports say is not what the Task Force says they say.** Tom Farnham, in his *Southern Connecticut State University: A Centennial History 1893-1993* [1993], writing of the 1992 NEASC report, says, “The NEASC committee was glowing in its endorsement of the curriculum: ‘The Team is pleased to see that SCSU’s general education program, housed in the School of Arts and Sciences, emphasizes writing, provides opportunities for “connected courses”, and requires the study of a foreign language.’” [p. 254] Nowhere in that report, which was often cited around 2002 to justify replacement of the program extant in the 1990s, does NEASC *say* it should be replaced—and what sense would that make, given its praise? In fact, the materials handed out by the General Education Task Force for a meeting in early 2008 quotes NEASC’s 2001 report to this effect: “University-wide general education program...lacks an organizing rationale of either purpose or outcomes... [and] needs thorough review, assessment, and updating.” [pp. 11-12] We will return to the middle of this quotation (in (3) below), but the words used at the end [“review”, “assessment”, and “updating”] entail that the program *not* be replaced, since none of those actions are *possible* if it is. If when my computer says “Program X needs updating”, I *replace the computer*, I cannot be said to be “updating” *Program X*. This is a point about the logic of concepts: In order for any X to be “updated” it must continue in existence. The point is that NEASC’s language shows it was *not* proposing replacement.
2. **There is no argument against the present general education system provided by the Task Force.** Given the operations of the Task Force, there could not be such an argument, since that would require having *to distinguish between the general education system and how it is taught*. It should be obvious that one could have a well-designed system that produces problematic education because the teaching in the system is poor. The Task Force never attempted this necessary distinction. In fact, it never tries to show education of Southern students is problematic in any way.
3. **Should there be an “organizing rationale of purposes and outcomes”?** The quotation from NEASC in (1) above raises the question of the desirability of having an “overall structure, goals”. Such a proposal involves confusion between *content*, say, the kind of thing a parochial school would provide, and *meaning*, namely, what the student who goes through the system should provide. The Task Force seems to say we should organize the general education system in order to

- provide meaning, although they do not follow through on this. One easily could argue that *not* providing overall purposes for an educational system puts the burden of the *meaning* of the education where it belongs, namely, on the student. The Task Force proposal, with its lack of proscribed content and unconnected forms [various proposed “skills”] fails on both the content and meaning counts.
4. **Confusions regarding the concept of an “educated person”.** The Task Force’s proposal says the education provided should fit “the *institution’s* concept” of an educated person, but there is no suggestion of what that might be for Southern. When I asked what that notion might be at a 2008 public presentation, I was read back the proposal’s list of skills to be acquired, as if “having an education” meant that one could do certain things! (cf. (6) below) Of course, there is a long-standing concept of an educated person out there. A person is “educated” if one knows [at least] one’s culture’s institutions and achievements. This is not merely a matter of success at certain activities or skills, and essentially involves knowing the substance of those achievements, including knowledge generated. This latter knowledge, in a modern society, essentially involves understanding the disciplines of knowledge the society has produced. The Task Force proposal is very deficient on this point.
 5. **There is an analytic point about a common knowledge base for an educated person** that parallels the common notion referred to in (4). The Task Force proposal allows that fields, disciplines, could be avoided [it assumes there is no knowledge an educated person *must* have]. The Task Force proposal focuses on the individual student, and so fails to acknowledge a community of educated persons, their interactions, and so forth. It is open to the criticism that a group of people could excel in what the Task Force proposes, but not be able to talk to one another because there is presupposed no common knowledge base for the group.
 6. **Connection to larger philosophical debates starting in the 20th century.** There is an opposition about language and thought in the 20th century between a “structuralist” versus a “referentialist” concept of language. The Task Force proposal is on the less defensible [structuralist] side of this debate, but there is no way in the space available here to articulate this. Beyond the philosophical part of this division there is also an educational [generally psychological] debate as well on the significance of “content” over “skills”. The Task Force proposal is deficient on this count, too.
 7. **Confusion about “Core Curriculum”.** The Task Force’s 2002 Report and subsequent statements seem to express a muddle about what a “core curriculum” is. The 2002 report begins (p. 2) by citing the desirability of core curricula, and treats this as supporting a generally skills-based proposal such as they have delivered, but a “core curriculum” has traditionally been associated with providing a foundation for a common knowledge base for students [consider the University of Chicago program as the paradigm]. The traditional core curriculum in no way disparages the skills needed to understand the substance provided, but assumes that skills acquired are intimately connected to the substance (cf. (9) below).
 8. **“Dumbing-Down” Southern.** In an attempt to justify changes here the Task Force cites faculty dissatisfaction with students in upper class courses, but does

- not go beyond superficial polling in this matter. It is concluded, based on nothing that I can discover, that the problem is skills. This would not describe my disappointments, although I would welcome better skills. I often am taken aback by what my upper division students *do not know*. The solution for that is not less emphasis on substance or the disciplines that produce it. Although there is not space here to argue this, the Task Force proposal, and the manner of its construction, seems to me a part of the process in our recent past which was described to me by another faculty member as justifying her “feeling that Southern was becoming a Community College”. Having no experience of such places, I only can note that the proposal’s construction avoided what expertise was available at Southern regarding educational matters. The significance of expertise [substance over style, knowledge over skill] is a long term ideal in Western education, appearing at least as early as Plato’s *Apology* and *Republic*.
9. **Transfer of Learning.** The proposal assumes there is no transfer of learning problem; that is, it assumes one may learn skill S in field A, and then that one can transfer skill S to field B, and so on, rather than demanding confronting the different ways skills work in different disciplines. There is good reason to think this false. This assumption appears in the proposal’s view that success in acquiring a skill in a particular field is sufficient for being an educated person.
 10. **Whether the Proposal is a Liberal Arts Program.** The Task Force has made much of its proposal being for a “liberal studies” program, but nowhere in their proposals or discussions is there any attempt at articulating what that means. This is a serious failing in the proposal. As the classic study of liberal education, Kimball’s *Orators and Philosophers*, shows, there are two traditions in “liberal education”: the Philosophers, who emphasize the speculative, restless pursuit of truth (Socrates), and the Orators, who emphasize the public expression of what is known, and so the skills to do so (Cicero). In the contemporary context the pursuit of truth is in the disciplines; however the Task Force proposal comes down on the Orator’s side. Any sensible program will promote both aspects of the tradition, but with an emphasis on the Philosophers’ side (one needs something to talk about): to paraphrase Kant, “Skills of articulation without Data, are empty, while Data without Skills of articulation are blind.”
 11. **This critique provides a negative defense of the current program; others of a positive nature are available.** One of the weakest aspects of the claim we should change everything is the Task Force view of our current program. The only argument I have heard over the years for why we should get rid of it is a sort of “*tu quoque* fallacy”, namely, the claim we should change our general education system because everyone else is. The Task Force also tries to critique the present system by name-calling [it’s a “*loose distribution system*” of “more or less unrelated courses”, claiming it probably “lacks a coherent educational philosophy” [2002 Report, p. 2]]. That is, the authors conclude that because they cannot see such a “philosophy”, there is none. But our current system is not a “loose” distribution system; it is a “core curriculum” system, and that is why the required courses come from identifiable *types*. So, we require courses from English, History, two kinds of Sciences, Politics, Philosophy, and so on.

Not so many years ago, the School of Education required its students to not only study Education, but to have an academic major as well. This was their way of recognizing the point made here in several places: “skills” are not enough...one must have something to talk *about*.

Although the Task Force members cannot see one, it is easy to provide justifications for the choices present in our current system, for example, via a “hierarchy of languages” perspective, or from the point of view of the relationships among the various kinds of “objects” studied. In a more contemporary vein, one could do so in terms of the concept of “information”. Although a justification is easy, that is not to claim we actually teach the way that would make the most sense for the system we have. Finally, the current system assumes that the *student* will determine the meaning of the education provided; so, its lack of an overall defense is part of its value and meaning (cf. (3) above).

12. So, **the proposal** is ignorant [assumes no particular knowledge must be acquired by a community of educated persons (4) (5) (10)], confused [its arguments against the current system, its description of itself (2) (3) (7) (10) (11)], contradictory [the proposal is inconsistent with its own cited reasons for itself (1) (3) (4) (11)], and superficial [allows for, even demands, that it be constructed so that students may avoid knowledge which has been the standard assumption of being educated and which is necessary for a community of educated persons (5) (6) (7) (8) (10)]. If these are not good reasons for rejecting the Task Force proposal, then I would be happy to entertain proposals for what would be.
13. **Rather than changing our general education program**, we should seriously confront the question of the various ways that we teach. No matter how “good” the general education program, if in our teaching we do not consider how what we are doing in our classes relates to other ideas and disciplines, nothing much will change. Even more important is what we do with our advising. When I came here over thirty-five years ago, one of the first things I noticed about Southern was how “departmentally insular” students here were. This has not changed and is a result of the “major department as sponge” idea in which the demands of the major program all but rule out getting a broad education. Where I went to school it was routine for students to take courses in departments other than the one in which they were majoring, and I am not talking about meeting requirements. Real changes in the education of our students are much easier to come by than by the kind of changes the General Education Task Force is recommending.