

Quality, Equity, and Post-Triage Planning:

A Tool Kit for Academic Leaders

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Across higher education, scenario planning is at a fever pitch. Pressed as never before by the triple threat of a dangerous pandemic, a still-unfolding economic catastrophe, and an historic racial reckoning, educators are working hard to ensure that higher education remains a gateway to opportunity for millions of aspiring learners. In fact, now is the time to open new pathways.

Both authors have worked for decades with far-reaching educational reform movements. We know and salute the dedication, creativity, and undaunted concerns for students' best educational interests that the majority of educational leaders—faculty, administrators, and staff—possess.

Today, in this season of post-triage planning, committed educational leaders must press forward with reforms that already were in the making. If you are an educator involved in campus planning—or if you have campus colleagues called upon to make hard decisions—this paper is for you.

Education leaders today face staggeringly tough budget choices. Many presidents [report](#) that they expect to make cuts in at least some academic programs. Some systems have indicated they intend wholesale program consolidation. We recommend avoiding major cuts, if at all possible. Now is the time to think outside the box about financial planning. We realize, however, that for many institutions, cutting and restructuring may be in the picture.

While program restructuring may be part of your future, please do not permit revenue and enrollment considerations to become the sole guide. Budgets are a means, not an end—and in higher education, the larger purpose must be high quality learning for students from all backgrounds—with special attention to those who traditionally have been poorly served across all segments of the U.S. educational system.

At this challenging moment, let's reach higher. And wider. Decisions must be driven by what today's diverse students really need and what will best position graduates for long-term success, in their careers, in civil society, and in achieving personal goals.

Take a look at the [rubric](#) one of the authors used at Governors State University to address the Illinois budget impasse of 2015-17.

You will note that the rubric emphasizes *mission, quality, and diversity*. Using this rubric enabled Governors State to merge some programs and help others creatively restructure to better serve students. As you create your own rubrics, please create criteria involving quality learning outcomes, high impact educational practices, and success in serving diverse learners.

Before the Pandemic: Redesigns Already in the Making

Before the pandemic jolted higher education into crisis planning, educators across all higher education sectors already were engaged in far-reaching reinventions of good practice in undergraduate education. These reinventions—which we call Quality/ Equity Priorities—must be advanced, not waylaid.

The Quality/Equity Priorities already in the making are important for all college learners. But they are essential for the nation’s new majority students (first-generation, low-income, students of color, adults, and military veterans). These students who were marginalized for so long now make up the majority of all undergraduates in U.S. higher education. They are the nation’s best hope for a flourishing and more equitable future.

With new majority learners in mind, scenario planning must foreground equitable access to quality learning. This article provides a tool kit: Program Evaluation Rubric (link above), Four Top Quality/Equity Priorities, and [Questions](#) to inform crucial Quality/Equity decisions. The Quality/Equity Priorities and tools apply to all programs, whether online, face-to-face, or hybrid.

Four Top Quality/Equity Priorities:

1) Quality/Equity Requires Much More Than a Major

For too long, the public discussion about higher education has been myopic—and misleading—in its sole focus on students’ choice of a college major. Many students assume that the only practical choice of a major must sound like a job. It is certainly true that accounting is the right major for students who aspire to be accountants and who understand accountants’ contributions to the workforce and society. Students go wrong when they select accounting only because it sounds like a job and have no understanding that a major in English, let us say, may be more compatible with their interests while laying a strong foundation for many fulfilling careers.

What students must understand, however, is that employers are insisting, across countless forums and [surveys](#), that it takes much more than a major to succeed in today’s economy. For success, students need the right mix of field specific learning and a full set of cross-cutting capacities:

- communication (oral, written, and digital),
- collaborative problem-solving,
- diversity learning and acumen,
- reaching agreements across difference,
- ethical reasoning and responsibility, and
- facility in adapting learning to new contexts and challenges.

Employers also look for evidence of curiosity and commitment to learning new things--as demonstrated by completing such high impact practices as senior projects, internships, community-based assignments, undergraduate research, and [ePortfolios](#).

Any major can foster these cross-cutting capacities and applied learning opportunities. To ensure student success, every major and degree program should.

What's the Quality/Equity lesson here? If your campus team is reviewing programs with an eye to cost containment or consolidation, it's not enough to look only at enrollment or revenue potential. It is important that the program's overall design incorporates cross-cutting skills and applied learning experiences for *all* students, not just for honors students.

Check the specified list of learning outcomes for every program under review. Do they include the cross-cutting capacities listed above? Is the program well designed to ensure that all students practice and develop the intended learning outcomes? Accreditors for various professions are already on your side. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), for example, weaves broad learning outcomes and general education criteria into their standards. So do many other professional accreditors.

2) With the World in Flux, High Quality General Education is More Important Than Ever

Cross-cutting skills are important keys to the future for America's learners. But skills and applied learning projects are only part of the "it takes more than a major" requirement.

Our current crises—health, the economy, and racial disparities—make it clear that twenty-first century challenges are, and will remain, relentlessly multi-disciplinary. Whether in the economy or society or grappling with the future of the planet, problem-solvers must come together across many lines of disciplinary, technological, and experiential expertise. Broad, cross-disciplinary learning is a critical component of quality preparation for a world facing convulsive predicaments.

Think for a minute about the new learning we all need in this pandemic. It will be an historic breakthrough, of course, to produce a vaccine that works. But it will take even greater societal creativity—across tens of thousands of cultural borders—to persuade billions of people to reliably take the vaccine – and to adopt a host of unfamiliar practices that can make humanity safer.

Americans have long since embraced the importance of broad multi-disciplinary learning in a quality college education. Almost every state and the regional accreditors require that, beyond a major, a college degree must include general education that imparts broad knowledge and intellectual capacities.

But for too many college students, as both of us have urged for decades, general education has devolved into a shopping cart experience, with students left on their own to discern any possible thematic connections across random courses. Ironically, carefully designed core courses are not only educationally more effective than the shopping cart, they also are more cost-effective. To continue the metaphor, when students choose randomly—and aimlessly from the market's shelves—it's difficult to manage the inventory. Core courses with pre-determined enrollment limits are more economical to implement. General education through core courses linked in learning communities is the strategy at Governors State University.

Well before the pandemic, faculty members across all sectors of higher education already were re-conceiving general education to include:

- well-designed first-year experiences and seminars;

- deliberate “big question connections” across multiple courses, whether through topically organized learning communities, student-designed “thematic pathways,” or big, over-arching civic prompts that help organize students’ inquiry in general education from first to final year,
- a focus on cross-cutting capacities such as writing-across-the-curriculum, evidence-based reasoning, and other essential learning outcomes listed above;
- high impact practices (HIPS) such as undergraduate research, community-based learning, diversity learning and/or ePortfolios;
- culminating experiences that help students integrate and apply their learning to their own significant questions.

Every one of these reforms is intended to help new majority students make the most of their college education. With equitable access to quality learning the primary concern, these general education redesign efforts deserve to be both protected and advanced in the new pandemic scenario planning. Don’t be tempted by the short-sighted view that huge general education sections (taught at a distance, these days) may be a cost minimizer. Question the shopping-cart approach to general education on both educational and economic grounds. For both quality and equity, general education courses should be well-designed to help students become skilled in using evidence to dig into complex problems—on their own and with peers.

Ask the critical questions: Where and how in our program can students explore systemic racism, global health insecurity, climate challenges, and struggles for voice and justice?

General education was created to expand this nation’s civic capacity and creativity. With the world facing wrenching choices, redesigns for general education must strengthen all learners’ readiness and ability to tackle hard questions. Getting general education right for new majority learners is higher education’s responsibility to democracy.

3) Narrow Postsecondary Learning Will Deepen the Disparities That Already Are Convulsing Our Society

We’ve already said—[and new research underscores](#)—that broad, multi-disciplinary learning is a quality signature for American higher education, a signature that must be both enlarged and sharpened so that every student can become adept in big picture inquiry and multi-front analysis of questions that matter. And yet, long before the pandemic hit, low-income students were already less likely than others to experience the high quality liberal education that combines broad multi-disciplinary learning and cross-cutting skills development with specialization.

Why is that? Too often we hear about public universities cutting liberal arts and sciences majors and courses and reducing rather than redesigning their general education curricula. So even as elite institutions double down on making general education more inquiry-focused and problem-centered, students in too many other institutions get only the shopping cart approach, and less rather than more of the big picture learning graduates need in the world beyond college.

Simultaneously, many new majority students, especially low-income and adult students, enroll in short-term, job-related programs that include no broad learning at all. Keyed to immediately available jobs, these short-term programs were never designed to provide general education either for citizenship or for career mobility. While addressing the short-term requirements of the pandemic recession, planners

must resist the temptation to substitute the development of narrowly conceived programs for the hard work of developing multiple pathways to what is really needed for students' long-term success.

Let's be clear here. When well-designed, a short-term program may indeed be the right choice for a student who needs an immediate boost in income. (And it may augment a degree that a student already has completed.) With millions of unemployed adults now looking for a pathway forward, educators must be prepared to help students discern which credential programs can reliably provide job mobility. (With students' interests in mind, Lumina Foundation released last year a [model](#) for ensuring quality in the new credential landscape.)

But even if a short-term program is the right choice today, every pre-degree student who enrolls in a short-term career or technical program also needs—and deserves—two things: 1) clear advising that this program is not a substitute for a quality college education but rather a stepping stone *toward* that full degree: and 2) guidance about seeking out degree pathways that will scaffold job-focused studies into associate and baccalaureate degree programs. (For more on scaffolding, see #4 below.)

What is not equitable is to provide broad, big picture liberal learning mainly to students already advantaged by income and class.

Especially in this era of racial reckoning, students who have suffered from disparity should be co-creators in the new learning needed to find solutions for democracy's future. It would be a travesty indeed if only the most fortunate students get to probe such questions as social power, systemic racism, and the world's ongoing struggles toward justice. As we redesign programs—online, in-person, or both—new majority students' access to big picture liberal learning must be part of the planning.

4) To Serve Quality and Equity, Align Career-Related Studies into Redesigned Degree Pathways

The long-standing dividing lines between career-preparation and big picture, multi-disciplinary education must be recognized as a structural barrier that reinforces inequity. Higher education's reorganization efforts should design associate and bachelor's degrees that meld career-related applied studies with the other hallmark components of a high quality liberal education: big picture, multi-disciplinary general education, high impact practices, and the cross-cutting skills graduates actually need both to thrive in the economy and help build an inclusive democracy.

Fortunately, models for such realignment or "inverted degrees" already exist. Governors State University's inverted degree programs allow students with career/technical associate degrees to complete bachelor's degrees with general education inverted to the last two years of study.

The University of Wisconsin System has established a Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences (B.A.A.S) degree, which creates a new broad learning pathway for students who completed technical and career-focused studies.

With this approach, which integrates technical studies with broad learning and majors, the University of Wisconsin System and Governors State University show us how to erase once and for all the deeply inequitable concept of a "terminal degree" —meaning a credential that can't be applied toward requirements for a baccalaureate degree.

Many more such redesigned pathways are needed. As transformative change moves forward in postsecondary education, laddering short-term credentials into full degree pathways can provide breakthrough opportunities for today's new majority learners.

Going Forward:

This paper is a call to action.

Educators working on program redesign should seize the opportunity to ask searching questions about the educational practices to be included in their degree programs. What's working well now for new majority students? What new learning is needed—for students and for our colleges and universities—as we engage in the nation's quest to recognize racism and create a more equitable and inclusive society?

To assist the analysis and program planning at your institutions, here is a [link](#) to an additional set of Questions to Ask About Quality/Equity, at the institutional, general education, and program level.

We know you'll want to edit and amend – and we warmly encourage you to do so. From our experience, we know that tools are valuable, and this article is meant to open our tool box for your use.

Change is the only constant in this uncertain world. Combining Quality and Equity for new majority learners is the right change to make at this pivotal moment in American history and in higher education history.

Budgets may be the prompt. But new designs for Quality/Equity can emerge from your efforts.