“Our ... youth are born under happier stars than you and I were. They acquire all learning in their mother’s womb, and bring it into the world ready made. The information of books is no longer necessary; and all knowledge which is not innate, is in contempt or at least neglect.” (1)
- Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 1814

The “problem” of waning student erudition has no doubt been discussed since the age of Plato; what changes is the conversation around why this is so with each generation seeking its own explanation related to its own time. Today, one sign of being an educated person is having a college degree, hence our interest in moving students toward this goal.

I would argue that in order to increase retention and graduation rates there needs to be a cataclysmic shift in the structure of educational programs combined with the delivery of those programs including General Education.

This is difficult when the trend in education (and elsewhere) is to assume a solution to a problem, throw lots of money and energy at it, without having first done the rigorous piloting of the solution using the very methods of critical reflection and analysis that we want our students to learn and use.

In formulating a new General Education program for York, one must first address the matter of graduation rates and how evidence-based planning can be used to help guide the task.

**Graduation Rates**

What do we know about graduation rates?

Keep in mind that graduation rate does not equal educational attainment. Educational attainment measures the portion of the adult population (25 to 64) who obtain a college degree; graduation rate measures the percent of students who start college and finish within a prescribed amount of time. Educational attainment hovers around 30% of the adult population in the United States (NB: All data cited come from Persistence and Attainment of 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students: After 6 Years, December 2010, a report from the National Center for Educational Statistics.)

Compared to the last survey begun in 1996, the numbers have not changed. The last Beginning Post Secondary Survey found that 62.7% of students who began at a 4-year college in 1996, received a degree by 2001; the current report indicates that 63.2% of students who began at 4-year college in 2003, received a degree by 2009. Note the change though from 5 to 6 years for completing the degree.

The 4-year graduation rate from public colleges is 29%. (It is 50.4% at private colleges). The 6-year graduation rate from public colleges is 59.5%. (It is 64.6% at private colleges).

The most likely student to complete a college degree in 4 years is the same student who has always been the most likely: a white, upper middle class student under the age of 25 who does not work, whose parents have a college degree and who begins at a traditional 4-year institution straight from high school.

Students who were 20 years old or younger when they started college in 2003 were 10 times more likely to earn a degree than students who were over 30.

Regarding retention, less than half, about 40% students receive their degree/certificate from the institution at which they started.

Why so little change from the 1990s to now?

One conclusion being drawn from the current report is that most institutions have not adapted well to the needs of different students going to college at a different time. The increase in the numbers of students attending college is largely due to...
older, first-generation, immigrant, low-income students being added to the mix; yet, the basic structures and cultures of these institutions were established for a different student body and remain essentially unchanged.

What seems to be missing, even when there is recognition of the problem, is having an appropriate plan to address the problem and an implementation strategy for that plan that is well managed.

This last idea is key as various reports indicate that similar institutions enrolling similar students have dramatically different retention and graduation rates; one reason cited for lower rates is managerial incompetence – this managerial incompetence is seen across the categories of administration, staff, and faculty members.

**Evidence-Based Planning**

The idea of evidence-based planning comes to us from the health care sector; in 2005, for example, Medicare began an incentive reimbursement policy for health care providers ($6,000 per patient) for administering the drug tPA within three hours of a stroke, because it has been shown that patient recovery and mortality are significantly improved by this process.

The Obama health plan stresses evidence-based planning and now other sectors of government including education are utilizing this approach. We see it at CUNY in the PMP goals and results and rewards.

What is odd is that it has taken so long for evidence-based planning and contingent rewards to become a central policy factor; this seems especially odd at institutions of higher learning which advocate methods of logic and science that are at the heart of evidence-based models.

I would add that in addition to evidence-based planning, there needs to be ongoing assessment to ensure that outcomes are in line with planning goals. I would call this evidence-based implementation.

**General Education Reform**

The General Education program of any institution is but one piece of the basic structure and culture of that institution; but, of course, as part of a strategic plan it can change the way a college engages students, faculty members, and staff.

When one evaluates the core requirements of those institutions that appear to be successful with respect to retention and graduation rates, there seem to be four qualities they share:

1. They are small to modest in size ... around 35 credits;
2. they are sequential ... there is a pathway laid out that students must follow with foundation courses at the start followed by courses that provide breadth ... skills then content knowledge;
3. they offer many choices even at the foundation level ... one college (SUNY Cortland) has 20 courses across disciplines that can fulfill the quantitative skills component, most successful colleges offer numerous choices in the content knowledge areas; and,
4. they include an orientation toward learning outcomes.

(2)

Two aspects of concern to me that relate to the General Education proposal being evaluated at York are sequencing and evidence-based implementation.

**Sequencing the Liberal Arts**

In medieval universities, the liberal arts were seven in number divided into two parts, the trivium and the quadrivium (“the three roads” and “the four roads”). The model is still valuable to us understanding that it is the content and delivery of that content that will change, NOT the structure of the approach.

(The quadrivium includes the subject areas, the breadth areas, those courses that come after the skills or foundation courses. The discussion of what areas might be included in a General Education program is for another day. Most of the subject areas that constitute the modern academy did not exist in Plato’s academy; hence the quadrivium was limited to arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy.)

The trivium consists of what we would think of today as basic learning skills; in teaching research methods in psychology, for example, this is described to students as the skills needed to produce a research paper.

*cont’d on p.8*
Originally these were grammar, logic and rhetoric; or to put it another way, these skills are:

- how we learn information,
- how we evaluate information, and,
- how we communicate information.

The process of how these skills are attained is one akin to the models offered in classical developmental psychology (3): think of it as a staircase where learners must have success at one step before proceeding to the next step. Therefore, being able to read and understand information comes before being able to think critically about that information, which comes before being able to tell someone else your opinion about that information. Failure at one step means that one cannot proceed adequately to the next.

(There is an underlying give and take at work where critical analysis requires taking an idea apart to understand it fully, while ultimately being able to communicate the idea requires synthesis, that is, putting it back together.)

This is a sound model that continues to serve many successful institutions well and this is why I question the notion of General Education “reform”. There is much evidence to suggest that the failure is not in the General Education requirements, but in the delivery of those requirements and in the support services that are a necessary part of that delivery.

If the goal is to increase retention and graduation rates, then this must be evidenced before a substantial number of students are subjected to a revised General Education requirement. General Education reform is not the answer; it is not the magic bullet.

Increasing retention and graduation rates will require much more than reforming Gen Ed; it will require change at the local level at York, at the CUNY-wide level and nationally to reflect the changes in the fundamental characteristics of students pursuing a college education. We need to prepare students locally to meet the challenges that they will face globally.

Faculty and staff during the Academic Leadership Retreat

Perhaps it is more fitting to speak about “reclaiming” General Education.

Implementation plan with ongoing assessment

Going back to the notion of evidence-based planning, there also needs to be assessment as you go rather than after the fact.

In the evaluation and creation/recreation of General Education programs, much effort is expended up front. Universities establish Gen Ed Task Forces that often involve many faculty members and staff members to collaborate toward a program that best serves the institution and its students. The task force must gather information and work towards a plan all of which may take years (as has been the case at York). By the time the task force puts forward its conclusions, the press to enact the resulting plan is usually substantial.

The process itself often gets in the way of critical evaluation. A drawback is a phenomenon that social psychologists call “group think.” This is a concept put forward by Irving Janis in 1972 (as way to explain the Bay of Pigs crisis) where the maintenance of group cohesion and agreement becomes the focus, circumventing sound decision-making. (4) In the corporate world, this might be seen as the eagerness of the seller to get the “buy in” ... and only later do you discover that you bought swampland in Florida.

I must assert that just because many fine people have worked hard together over a lengthy period of time does not mean that the result is without challenge. The piece in the current proposal that seems to need the greatest challenge is the lack of clear implementation program that includes assessment.

2. Public colleges that have had greater success at retaining and graduating students can be easily found by looking at any of the “best schools” lists that include the rates for these factors. The one used for this presentation was Kiplinger's Best Values in Public Colleges.
3. Erik Erikson, for example, called his model of development “epigenetic”, that is, each stage is implicitly present at birth, each stage builds on the previous stage, and each stage sets up development in the subsequent stage.