

I am very proud of the mission of NCCC to enrich our communities and our students' lives. It's a wide general statement, true, but we help people with a wide range of educational needs. We help people take a few classes in a specific area, just to brush up on their knowledge or add a new skill. Sometimes they just need to know how to use a new computer program for their job or pick up a short certification in order to get a promotion. Sometimes we help people finish high school and get their GED. Other times we help people complete a full associate's degree on their way to a bachelor's degree or even on to graduate work. We try to help in any way we can.

This wide mission challenges the notion of "junior college," that our sole purpose is to provide the first two years of a four year degree. That junior college notion, while vastly understanding all the things we do, is partially true. The majority, about 60% of NCCC students, are doing just that – they are degree seeking transfer students.

So much about who we are is put into preparing students to go on in their four-year degree programs through offering what we call "general education" or gen ed classes. These are the courses that are practically the same no matter what your major may be – English composition, college math (usually algebra), speech, science, humanities classes, sociology classes, and the like. It is part of every college student's degree plan as society has believed for a very long time that college graduates should be "well rounded" and not just technicians in a major.

And students have complained about this since the dawn of the modern college. "Why am I paying for a class in (INSERT GEN ED COURSE HERE) when I'm here to learn about (INSERT MAJOR PROGRAM NAME)?" Our traditionally aged student can't see the value of gen ed. But I have to say as much as I wince at this sentence, a second sentence, usually spoken by many student's parents, gives me chest pain. A parent will tell their children at enrollment time, "Let's get the gen ed courses out of the way." Ugh! Even parents, who understand that one must meet the qualifications for a degree so they are ok with the student taking the course, do not seem to value gen ed either.

I hear some politicians across the country questioning the value of these courses in gen ed as well, to the point of discussing defunding these classes. They say the role of colleges and universities is to produce a qualified workforce and that means major courses not gen ed.

Let's be honest. I was one of those students who did not see the value of gen ed when I was in college. Paying tuition and doing homework for classes I did not value. "When will I ever use this?" I have said that myself.

I was wrong. In my opinion, and research will back me up on this, general education is much more important than major classes.

Why? First, let's look at that seemingly all-important major. It turns out, it's not all that important in many lives. Yes, there are majors where it is critical for certain career areas, like being a medical doctor or a lawyer for instance. And yes, a major often helps a person get their first job, but studies have shown that most people move on from a career in their major area. In fact the number is as high as 60% move out of the career and into something else within the first 10 years of being out of college. All that

work (and money) in college getting a degree in a specific area to prepare for a career and most of us spend less than 10 years in that career. So within 10 years, for most people, the major courses are not worth as much. I have many credit hours on my transcript that make me an expert in setting up and running broadcast equipment. I'm not getting much use out of those hours now, believe me.

But what skills do students need no matter what job they have? The skills taught in the gen ed. How about that need to prepare the workforce? What we in higher education are hearing from employers is the new generation of employees need greater communication skills, critical thinking/problem solving, ability to work in groups, and systems thinking. We often hear, "Just give me someone who can think and learn and I'll train them for the specific job." Where do we focus on these "soft skills" or "employability skills" in the curriculum? In the gen ed courses.

Further, often times employers must retrain new employees with the specific ways they want a particular job done, so time spent teaching them one method in college in a major was essentially wasted, replaced with the new employer method. But if we teach them to learn, to reason, to adapt, then they do just fine.

And to those few politicians that think that college should only be about specific workforce skill attainment I remind them of this fact. A democracy REQUIRES an educated electorate who understand the issues and are capable of electing the best people to address those issues. They need exposure to different cultures to fully understand our own. They need to understand statistics and what statistical error really means to the application of the findings. They need direct knowledge of our government and how it operates. The need to know the difference between junk science and the real thing. They should understand the difference between factual communication and propaganda. And they need to see the difference between persuasion and manipulation, between logical arguments and emotional trickery.

At NCCC we have four main gen ed outcomes that we focus on – responsible citizenry, healthy living, effective communication, and analytical thinking. We measure the learning in these outcomes every year and look for ways to improve them. Why? We know how important these outcomes are to fulfilling the promise of our mission.

All of this is too important to "just get it out of the way." College general education, if done correctly, leads to transferable workplace skills, lifelong learning, and a higher quality of life for the student. General education is part of the foundation of our democracy. Let us not dismiss it, under fund it, or devalue it.