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ARTICLE

The Other Gen Ed: Social Sciences, Curricular Innovation, and the Defense of Democracy in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Higher Education

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Abstract

Fear for the future of democracy in the 1930s and 1940s led university educators to redefine the purpose of general education as preparation for democratic citizenship. This mobilized social scientists to engage in curricular reform and experiment with progressive pedagogical practices in new general education courses. These courses have been overlooked in the scholarship on general education, which focuses on Great Books courses and educators' efforts to create a common culture linked to Europe. Uncovering these courses demonstrates that general education was an important part of higher education's commitment to democracy. Mid-twentieth-century social science general education was an innovative form of political education aimed at preparing independent-minded, engaged citizens with democratic values.

Keywords: higher education; citizenship education; democracy; twentieth-century United States

As fascism took root in Europe and the authoritarian nature of the Soviet regime became evident, American intellectuals and academics feared that democracy was in peril. As they considered the ways that they could thwart this threat, they turned to an institution close to them, higher education. After the United States entered World War II, universities found tangible ways to help defeat fascism through defense-related research and the training of military personnel. While the war raged on, academics continued to imagine ways that higher education could strengthen democracy beyond the battlefield. Once peace finally arrived, they jumped to put their ideas into practice.[1]

[1]Edward A. Purcell Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973); Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Benjamin Leontief Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s-1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Willis Rudy, *Total War and Twentieth-Century Higher Learning: Universities of the Western World in the First and Second World Wars* (Rutherford,

In the immediate aftermath of the war, numerous articles, books, and reports were published about the future of higher education and its democratic purpose. The most prominent was the President's Commission on Higher Education's report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, the first comprehensive national report on the sector.[2] The report (often referred to as the Zook report, for George F. Zook, the commission's chair) discussed two primary ways in which higher education needed to change to strengthen democracy. First, access needed to be significantly expanded through the cessation of discriminatory policies and the growth of public higher education, including a network of new two-year "community colleges." Second, the content of education needed to be reoriented through the adoption of a comprehensive general education program, the design of which was heavily influenced by progressive educational theories.

While Congress failed to pass the federal legislation proposed to implement the commission's recommendations, scholars largely agree that most of the commission's proposals related to access were eventually implemented.[3] However, its recommendations regarding general education have been largely ignored or seen as a failure. Roger Geiger, in his authoritative history of post-1945 American higher education, asserts that the President's Commission recommendations for general education were emphatically NOT adopted.[4] Instead, he maintains that the most common general education course in this period, "Western Civ," was antithetical to the recommendations of the report. "Hailed as general education," Geiger writes, "[Western Civ] was actually a repudiation of the instrumentalist interpretation championed by Dewey and the President's Commission." Geiger, synthesizing much of the scholarship on general education, concludes that the commission's general education program and progressive educational theories had little impact on higher education in this period.

Geiger, however, is misled by the scholarship on general education, which largely equates Western Civilization courses with Great Books courses and misses an important development in social science general education courses in midcentury higher

NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991); Christopher P. Loss, *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the 20th Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Matthew Tyler Penney, "'Instruments of National Purpose.' World War II and Southern Higher Education: Four Texas Universities as a Case Study" (PhD diss., Rice University, 2007).

[2]United States, *Higher Education for American Democracy: A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education* (Washington: US GPO, 1947).

[3]Claire Krendl Gilbert and Donald E. Heller, "Access, Equity, and Community Colleges: The Truman Commission and Federal Higher Education Policy from 1947 to 2011," *Journal of Higher Education* 84, no. 3 (May-June 2013), 417–43; Dongbin Kim and John L. Rury, "The Changing Profile of College Access: The Truman Commission and Enrollment Patterns in the Postwar Era," *History of Education Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (Aug. 2007), 302–27; Philo Hutcheson, "The 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education and the National Rhetoric on Higher Education Policy," *History of Higher Education Annual* 22 (2002), 91–107; Nicholas M. Strohl, "The Truman Commission and the Unfulfilled Promise of American Higher Education" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2018), and Ethan W. Ris, "Higher Education Deals in Democracy: The Truman Commission Report as a Political Document," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 54, no. 1 (Jan. 2022), 17–23. See also articles in two special journal issues on the Zook report: *History of Education Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (Aug. 2007), and *Peabody Journal of Education* 98, no. 3 (2023).

[4]Roger L. Geiger, *American Higher Education since World War II: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 23. Geiger capitalizes "NOT" in his discussion of the Zook report to emphasize higher education's rejection of the recommendations.

education.[5] The model of general education that gained traction by the 1930s was a tripartite program involving courses that synthesize three broad branches of knowledge: the humanities, the natural sciences, and the social sciences. As social scientists increasingly feared for the future of democracy, they turned to general education courses as an opportunity to strengthen democracy at home. The crisis of democracy increased social scientists' enthusiasm for general education and its perceived role in strengthening democratic commitments. By the end of World War II, social scientists at a wide variety of colleges and universities were discussing, designing, and teaching new general education courses aimed at preparing their students for democratic citizenship. While these courses did not represent a full implementation of the Zook Commission's proposed curriculum, one of its key recommendations—the implementation of problem-focused interdisciplinary social science courses—was adopted at many institutions.

The voluminous writings on general education published in the middle decades of the twentieth century document social scientists' engagement with general education. In this period, the well-known "Western Civilization" course, which framed its subject as the rise of democracy, did flourish. But so did interdisciplinary courses addressing contemporary social problems. While these two types of courses can be viewed as rival and contradictory responses to the call for general education, in fact, they shared a common purpose. Both courses were designed to prepare students for democratic citizenship. At some institutions, educators viewed them as complementary approaches and offered both types of courses or created hybrid courses that combined aspects of both models. Faculty teaching both types of courses were motivated by similar political concerns and tried to develop in their students a respect for democracy and key values and skills associated with effective citizenship.[6]

[5]For a related critique of recent scholarship on general education, see Ethan Schrum, "Shaping Minds or Defending Democracy? How Scholars Have Interpreted Major Reports on Higher Education from the 1940s," *Peabody Journal of Education* 98, no. 3 (May 2023), 335–44. For scholarship on general education, see Ian Westbury and Alan C. Purves, and National Society for the Study of Education, *Cultural Literacy and the Idea of General Education*, 87th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, part 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Gary E. Miller, *The Meaning of General Education: The Emergence of a Curriculum Paradigm* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988); W. B Carnochan, *The Battleground of the Curriculum: Liberal Education and the American Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); William Noble Haarlow, *Great Books, Honors Programs, and Hidden Origins: The Virginia Plan and the University of Virginia in the Liberal Arts Movement* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003); John Guillory, "Whose Afraid of Marcel Proust? The Failure of General Education in the American University," in *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II*, ed. David A. Hollinger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 25–49; Bryan McAllister-Grande, "General Education for a Closed Society: Neo-Puritanism in American Civic Education after World War II," *Teachers College Record* 123, no. 11 (Nov. 2021), 57–77; Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas* (W. W. Norton, 2010), chap. 1; John W. Schneider, "Remaking the Renaissance Man: General Education and the Golden Age of the American University," *American Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (March 2021), 53–74.

[6]This article is based on an extensive review of materials published from the mid-1930s through the mid-1950s, including books and collections of essays about general education, and education and social science journals. Most scholarship on general education relies on aspirational writings by well-known educators, such as Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler, or a couple of iconic reports such as the "Harvard Redbook" (see note 18). While these works are part of the research base for this article, I also rely on descriptions of specific courses. These are more likely to reveal what was taught at colleges and universities than

Uncovering a more complete history of social scientists' involvement in general education programs in the mid-twentieth century reveals much that has been lost in the historiography of higher education and the social sciences. Scholarship on progressivism in higher education focuses on a small number of distinctive colleges.[7] Social science general education courses show that experimentation with progressive educational ideas was more widespread than previously known. They also remind us that the reformist strand of the social sciences, associated with the Depression era, survived into the post-World War II period. When looking at international diplomacy, the Cold War seemed to begin almost immediately after the war ended, but its full impact on higher education would take longer.[8] Most importantly, these courses open a window into higher education's mid-twentieth-century commitment to strengthening democracy.

philosophical or aspirational writing. I found some of these descriptions in journals, but the most fruitful source is Earl J. McGrath, ed., *The Social Sciences in General Education* (Dubuque, IA: W. C. Brown Co., 1948). This is a collection of course descriptions from twenty-one institutions of various kinds. It is an underused resource that, according to Google Scholar, has only been cited once since 1970, in a 1987 dissertation: David Joseph Leese, "The Pragmatic Vision: Columbia College and the Progressive Reorganization of the Liberal Core—the Formative Years, 1880-1941" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1987).

[7]Gerald Grant and David Riesman, *The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Joy Rosenzweig Kliewer, *The Innovative Campus: Nurturing the Distinctive Learning Environment*, American Council on Education / Oryx Press Series on Higher Education (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1999); Reid Pitney Higginson, "When Experimental Was Mainstream: The Rise and Fall of Experimental Colleges, 1957-1979," *History of Education Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (May 2019), 195–226, and Steven R. Coleman, "To Promote Creativity, Community, and Democracy: The Progressive Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s" (Ph.D diss., Columbia University, 2000).

[8]In the standard historical account, the social sciences in the US began with a strong reformist orientation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but in the 1920s, this orientation was challenged by a countercurrent focused on objectivity. The Depression revived the reformist stance for a while, but the Cold War cemented the focus on objectivity and value-free science. Theodore M. Porter and Dorothy Ross, eds., *The Cambridge History of Science*, vol. 7, *The Modern Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Robert C. Bannister, *Sociology and Scientism: The American Quest for Objectivity, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Mark C. Smith, *Social Science in the Crucible: The American Debate over Objectivity and Purpose, 1918-1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994); Roger E. Backhouse and Philippe Fontaine, *The History of the Social Sciences since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Joel Isaac, *Working Knowledge: Making the Human Sciences from Parsons to Kuhn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Hunter Crowther-Heyck, *Age of System: Understanding the Development of Modern Social Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); Mark Solovey and Hamilton Cravens, *Cold War Social Science: Knowledge Production, Liberal Democracy, and Human Nature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); John G. Gunnell, *Imagining the American Polity: Political Science and the Discourse of Democracy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); Michael A. Bernstein, *A Perilous Progress: Economists and Public Purpose in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); *Sociology in America: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Dorothy Ross, "Whatever Happened to the Social in American Social Thought? Part 1," *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 4 (Dec. 2021), 1155–77; Dorothy Ross, "Whatever Happened to the Social in American Social Thought? Part 2," *Modern Intellectual History* 19, no. 1 (March 2022), 268–96. I don't dispute this overall account, but I do dispute that in the context of general education reform, it's a mistake to read the eventual impact of the Cold War into the immediate postwar period. I think this mistake leads Andrew Jewett to conclude that the social sciences were excluded from general education program at Harvard (*Science, Democracy, and the American University*, 232–33). Schrum makes a similar point in "Shaping Minds or Defending Democracy?" While it is outside the scope of this article, I do think that the Cold War would eventually narrow the kinds of social science general education courses offered at American universities.

We've been long aware of pervasive rhetoric around higher education and democracy in this period. These courses help us understand how those aspirations translated into practice.

Origins of the General Education Movement

The push for general education dates to the first decades of the twentieth century. A couple of decades after the adoption of electives, college faculty and administrators became concerned about their unintended consequences. Instead of making students more motivated and engaged, as their proponents originally promised, students seemed to take a random mix of courses selected mainly for convenience and ease. In addition, the flurry of scholarship produced in the new research universities did not lead to a more secure understanding of truth, but rather to increasingly specialized, disconnected, and disputed knowledge claims. In the context of increased industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, American academics began to yearn for greater unity of thought and a stronger common cultural heritage, and some thought it could be achieved through curricular reform.[9]

A few universities experimented with synthetic courses designed to draw together several fields of knowledge to provide students a broad orientation to the modern world. These efforts received a brief boost in World War I when the Student Army Training Corp (SATC) required courses on the war effort. These new "Citizenship" courses linked general education to the defense of democracy. SATC was short-lived, but a few institutions, such as Dartmouth, continued the courses after the end of the war. Around the same time, John Erskine created the "General Honors" course at Columbia, a course intended to engage students with the great questions of humanity through reading classic texts. This would be the progenitor of Columbia's famed "Humanities A" and the Great Books movement.[10]

Interest in general education grew after the war, but academics did not converge on a single model. Different aspects of the problem—overspecialization of knowledge, students' lack of serious intellectual engagement, separation of morality from truth, loss of cultural unity—pulled educators toward different models. Educators agreed that "general" was opposed to "specialized," but beyond that, their visions diverged. Some called for a curriculum based in the Great Books, arguing alternately that this form of study would teach students "first principles," or ground them in their cultural heritage, or improve their cognitive skills by exposing them to the best thinking. Others emphasized education for the whole person and envisioned programs that

[9]On the early survey courses, see Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), chap. 8.

[10]The Columbia Contemporary Civilization course is detailed in a number of institutional histories, including Timothy Cross, *An Oasis of Order: The Core Curriculum at Columbia College* (New York: Columbia College, 1995); Columbia University, *Columbia College Education: The Plan of the First Two Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939); Columbia College, *A History of Columbia College on Morningside* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954); Daniel Bell, *The Reforming of General Education: The Columbia College Experience in Its National Setting* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1968); and Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754-2004* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

prepared students for all their adult roles. Still others who were focused on the problem of overspecialization called for new courses that organized knowledge into three broad branches: the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. The first two groups, one advocating programs based on the Great Books and the other envisioning a comprehensive curriculum inspired by progressive educational theories, battled each other for dominance. Only a handful of institutions fully embraced one of these two directions; most faculties could not unite to create a coherent curriculum. The third option, integrative field-based courses, was less polarizing but still difficult to achieve.[11]

This conflict played out most dramatically at the University of Chicago, where President Robert Hutchins tried to impose a Great Books curriculum. Faculty, influenced by the ideas of their former colleague John Dewey, fought back and proposed an alternative progressive general education curriculum. Ultimately, the faculty decided to address the less controversial problem of overspecialization and created two-year required introductory courses for the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Despite its contested origins, this core curriculum came to be a defining feature of the University of Chicago experience. At many other colleges, faculty could not agree on a robust a general education program and instead opted for more modest curricular reforms, such as restrictions on students' free election of courses through concentration and distribution requirements.[12]

By the late 1930s, the Chicago model of general education, in which courses integrated the three broad areas of knowledge, became the accepted goal of curricular reform. In 1938, the American Council on Education (ACE), the umbrella organization representing various higher education associations, launched the Cooperative Study in General Education. The study aimed to bring clarity and momentum to the movement to create general education programs in American colleges and universities. The ACE study planned to recruit teams of administrators and faculty from different kinds of colleges and universities to design general education courses in in the three major divisions of knowledge. ACE staff would help study participants implement those programs, and after a few years, they would evaluate the programs and disseminate the findings so that successful models could be widely adopted.[13]

[11] Miller, *The Meaning of General Education*, chaps. 3-4.

[12] On the conflict at University of Chicago, see Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936); Harry D. Gideonse, *The Higher Learning in a Democracy: A Reply to President Hutchins' Critique of the American University* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937); Mary Ann Dzuback, *Robert Hutchins: Portrait of an Educator* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Purcell, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*.

[13] Letter from R. G. Tyler to L. A. Pittenger, June 30, 1941, American Council on Education Papers, folder 2, box 121, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford, CA (hereafter ACE Papers); *Cooperation in General Education: A Final Report of the Executive Committee of the Cooperative Study in General Education* (Washington: American Council on Education, 1947). See also B. Lamar Johnson, *What about Survey Courses?*, American General Education Series (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1937);and Kevin Shady Zayed, "Cooperation without Consensus: National Discussions and Local Implementation in General Education Reform 1930-1960" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2016), chap. 3.

The Crisis of Democracy and the Changing Aims of General Education

While the three field-based, integrative courses model of general education gained traction, world events forced American educators' attention on the crisis of democracy. The rise of fascism in Europe, the consolidation of the communist revolution in Russia, and the worldwide depression added a new layer to curricular debates. Higher education leaders and faculty began to think seriously about how they could help strengthen democracy. For some, this meant doubling down on research in political science and developing new programs in public administration.[14] But increasingly, attention turned to educating citizens, and this meant developing programs for all students. General education became the logical locus for civic education at the collegiate level.

Charles Merriam, professor of political science at the University of Chicago, drew attention to the importance of citizenship education throughout the 1930s, arguing for the need for more progressive civics programs. He coordinated an eight-country study of ways that citizens' political loyalties were formed and enacted and wrote a comparative analysis in his 1931 book *The Making of Citizens*. Merriam documented an international trend "in the direction of authority rather than liberty" and called for new forms of citizenship education that could counterbalance "conformity and obedience" with "independence, criticism, and detached judgment on the part of citizens."[15] Three years later, in his book *Civic Education in the United States*, he maintained that "social science is the master key to civic education, unlocking the door to political and social advance." He criticized social scientists for their "over-departmentalization" and failure to work across disciplinary boundaries. He also chided colleges for not offering compelling civic education, which he said was particularly unfortunate "in view of the large number of leaders who emerge from college groups, from the very classes often where social democracy and regard for the essentials of political democracy are weakest."[16] When Merriam's book was published in 1934, the focus of civic education was still the public schools. Within a decade, though, colleges and universities would assume a shared responsibility.

During the 1940s, general education became equated with citizenship education. Educators who formerly supported Great Books curriculum to restore the unity of truth and cultural coherence reframed their arguments to emphasize the civic value of great books. For example, Robert Hutchins, who had initially rejected preparing citizens as the purpose of higher education, embraced this aim in his 1943 book *Education for Freedom*. His opponents, pragmatists who viewed great books as authoritarian and anti-science, also linked their vision of general education with preparation for democratic citizenship in books such as Sidney Hook's *Education for Modern Man* (1946). While still disagreeing about pedagogy and the content of the curriculum, both

[14]Frederick C. Mosher, ed., *American Public Administration: Past, Present, Future* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1975).

[15]Charles Edward Merriam, *The Making of Citizens: A Comparative Study of Methods of Civic Training* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), 185, 184.

[16]Charles Edward Merriam, *Civic Education in the United States*, Report of the Commission on the Social Studies, American Historical Association, part 4 (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1934), ix, 70, 157. Merriam noted approvingly the integrated social science general education courses at the University of Chicago, the University of Minnesota, and Columbia.

traditionalists and progressives came to view preparation for democratic citizenship as the purpose of general education.[17]

Two of the most prominent postwar education reports on higher education pressed this priority. The President's Commission on Higher Education's report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, provided a comprehensive enumeration of the aims of general education that also emphasized citizenship. The first two goals were: "To develop for the regulation of one's personal and civic life a code of behavior based on ethical principles consistent with democratic ideals," and "To participate actively as an informed and responsible citizen in solving the social, economic, and political problems of one's community, State, and Nation." The much-publicized Harvard University report, *General Education in a Free Society*, defined general education as "that part of a student's whole education which looks first of all to his life as a responsible human being and citizen."[18] The language of citizenship and democratic living permeated discussions of higher education in the 1940s. The main debates in general education were recast as disagreements over the best means for preparing citizens.

The staff leading the ACE general education study witnessed this shift as it was happening. At the first conference of the Cooperative Study in 1938, ACE staff member Samuel Capen asked representatives from all the colleges to describe their goals for general education. Only one of them, Dean Sanders of Park College, in his sixth out of nine priorities, referenced "the present world crisis [and] called attention to the group of the urgent need for some type of instruction in the principles of democracy and in good citizenship."[19] By 1941, however, ACE staff noted the new primacy of citizenship as the purpose of higher education. This had a particularly profound impact on the social scientists participating in the study. In a newsletter, the ACE staff reported: "Instructors in the social sciences have vigorously and critically re-examined the nature and purposes of their courses and made modifications in terms of the basic criterion, 'What relation of the student's experience in this course to his participation in, understanding of, and contribution to a democratic system?'"[20] Strengthening democracy became the motivating purpose for social scientists who participated in the design of new general education programs.

The new emphasis on democratic citizenship translated into heightened prominence for the social sciences. The ACE evaluation study associated the various objectives of general education with curricular areas. First on their list of goals was "active, informed, responsible citizenship," which was attributed to the social sciences. Further down the list came "understanding the physical world," associated with the natural sciences, and "cultural appreciation" and "creativity," associated with the humanities. While educators believed that the humanities and the natural sciences also could

[17] Robert Maynard Hutchins, *Education for Freedom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1943); Sidney Hook, *Education for Modern Man* (New York: Dial Press, 1946).

[18] United States, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, 50-51; Harvard University Committee on the Objectives of General Education in a Free Society, *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), 51.

[19] "Minutes of the First Conference of the Cooperative Study in General Education," ACE Papers, folder 1, box 115.

[20] "Staff News Letter Cooperative Study in General Education," Nov. 19, 1941, ACE Papers, folder 3, box 123.

contribute to the shaping of citizens, the social sciences were essential. "If students are to decide wisely and well on matters affecting the social good," wrote Jack T. Johnson, a political science professor at the State University of Iowa, "modern education must develop minds disciplined to promote the general welfare. In this sense, a major share of the responsibility for general education must fall within the confines of courses in social science." Whether citizenship was defined narrowly as political obligations and rights or broadly as encompassing all social relations, social scientists claimed that they provided the information and the intellectual skills that students would need to develop democratic attitudes and sympathies.[21]

The prominence of the social sciences in postwar general education reflected a widespread sense that scientific and technological expertise had outstripped humans' capacity to responsibly use it. Educators argued that the solution to this dangerous situation was to raise people's understanding of human nature and society through the study of the social sciences. "While the post-war period has unfortunately entailed the necessity of continuing major emphasis upon research in the physical sciences, there is an increasing recognition of the serious gap in the social sciences created by war," noted Francis J. Brown of the American Council on Education. "Individual institutions, national commissions, and organizations both national and international have sought to make up this loss and bring higher education back into the balance." Emphasis on the social sciences was essential to win the "desperate race between education for effective world organization and world annihilation." While not new to the general education movement, social scientists found themselves at the center of it in the 1940s.[22]

Social Science General Education in Practice

The disputes that stymied the development of general education in the interwar period did not completely disappear after the outbreak of World War II. The period was marked by persisting tensions over the relative benefits of historical versus contemporary content, as well as tensions between traditionalists, who viewed higher learning as primarily cognitive, and progressives, who maintained that all learning was a psychosocial process.[23] Disagreements about the nature of learning and effective teaching percolated through social scientists' discussions about general education. But the consensus about the democratic purpose of general education softened these conflicts and paved the way for progress. In the 1940s and early 1950s, social scientists at a

[21] Paul L. Dressel and Lewis B. Mayhew, *General Education: Explorations in Evaluation; the Final Report* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1954) 11–13; Jack T. Johnson, "Core Courses in Social Science at State University of Iowa," in McGrath, *The Social Sciences in General Education*, 75. On contributions of the natural sciences to citizenship training, see Rebecca B. Miller, "Natural Sciences 4 and the Shaping of Postwar America" (PhD. diss., Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2009). On the humanities, see Charles Dorn, "Promoting the 'Public Welfare' in Wartime: Stanford University during World War II," *American Journal of Education* 112, no. 1 (Nov. 2005), 103–28;and McAllister-Grande, "General Education for a Closed Mind."

[22] Francis J. Brown, "Post-War Developments," in *The American College*, ed. P. F. Valentine (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 36

[23] Malcolm S. MacLean, "Conflicting Theories of General Education," in Valentine, *The American College*; H. T. Morse, ed. *General Education in Transition: A Look Ahead* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1951).

wide array of colleges came together and created new general education courses. At some institutions, social scientists clearly favored either the historical/traditional camp or the contemporary/progressive camp, and accordingly produced two distinct types of courses—"Western Civilization" or "Contemporary Social Problems." But at many institutions, social scientists agreed that both approaches were important forms of citizenship education. Some institutions included both types of courses in their general education requirements; others created hybrids of the two models or allowed students to choose between different models.[24]

The new emphasis on citizenship education undermined the popularity of the course that combined the various social science disciplines into a single overview. A survey course containing units on each of the major social sciences was a relatively common form of general education before the war but was almost universally rejected after it.[25] The University of Oregon, for example, had developed this type of course in the 1930s, but after the war, it created a committee to overhaul its general education program. Quirinus Breen, a professor of history, complained of the original course, "We have heretofore contented ourselves with putting our subjects together so as to suggest the unity provided by a string of pearls," and hoped that the future version of the course would provide more genuine integration and a clearer sense of the relevance of the field.[26] Faculty members at the University of Florida said they judged this model to be "an abomination and dropped it with a thud." They maintained that it "was academic rather than realistic; it carried over into society the artificial and sectarian distinctions of college departments."[27] This type of course, once seen as an efficient way to introduce students to the social sciences, help them to the see the relations among the disciplines, and prepare them for more specialized study, was now viewed as ineffective for citizenship education.

Rejecting this older style of survey created room for experimentation, and many institutions created committees to design new general education programs, of which Harvard's Committee on General Education and its subsequent report, *General Education in a Free Society,* is the most famous. For its model social science course, the Harvard committee recommended a historical course called "Western Thought and Institutions." Indicating the centrality of this course to the general education program's political agenda, the committee considered calling it "The Evolution of a Free Society," but feared that name might imply "indoctrination" and that students would be taught to view existing institutions as eternally perfect. Instead of unwavering devotion, the committee hoped the course would produce an understanding of, respect for, and commitment to the maintenance and improvement of the institutions essential to a free society. In doing this, it would "raise more questions than it professes to answer."

[24]Exact titles of courses, as well as course materials, varied from institution to institution. I am using these two names—"Western Civilization" and "Contemporary Social Problems"—as labels for a set of courses that followed a similar model. When discussing specific institutions, I use the names they used.

[25]C. DeVinney Leland and Earl S. Johnson, "General Introductory Courses in the Social Sciences," *American Sociological Review* 7, no. 5 (Oct. 1942), 676–80.

[26]Quirinus Breen, "Social Science Survey: A Liberal Arts Course at the University of Oregon," in McGrath, *Social Sciences in General Education*, 101.

[27]William G. Carleton and Winton W. Little, "The Social Science Comprehensive at the University of Florida," in McGrath, *Social Sciences in General Education*, 160.

These questions would address "ends as well as means," "values and objectives" as well as "institutional organization." The course would also analyze and critique "some of the great attempts which have been made to find answers to these questions."[28] The committee imagined that the "Western Thought and Institutions" course could achieve these ends by integrating the study of European history with the study of important texts of political and social theory.

The committee members did not think the course should attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of European history and social thought. They stressed that the course should be "selective, not inclusive." They imagined that the course would begin with some of the classic texts of Greece and Rome and would emphasize historical developments related to the growth of democracy and contemporary political debates. The primary responsibility for translating the committee's vision for the introductory social science course into practice fell to then assistant professor of government Samuel Beer, who developed "Western Thought and Institutions" (designated as Social Sciences 2). The course became iconic at Harvard, and Beer taught it for thirty years, updating lectures and changing the jokes, but keeping the structure largely the same.[29]

In developing this course, Harvard likely looked to Columbia for inspiration, which already offered a two-year social science sequence as part of its general education program, the first year of which covered the history of "Western Civilization." The course began with the breakup of the Middle Ages and introduced students to what course designers saw as the two most important cultural traditions of the West: "the Judaic-Christian quests for justice and love and Greco-Roman quests for natural law and order." The course then took students forward in time, covering "the growing dignity of the individual under the influence of the Renaissance and the Reformation; the revival of experimental science with its great effects on the manipulation of man's natural environment; the enlightenment and its search for natural law in social relations; the birth of democracy, liberal capitalism, and the ideal of internationalism." The course was required of all freshmen and was taught in sections of twenty-five to thirty students. Various faculty members lectured on their own area of expertise and led discussion sections. The readings consisted of "fairly long" excerpts of primary texts by writers such as Aristotle, Aquinas, Dante, Hobbes, Rousseau, Adam Smith, J. S. Mill, and Marx. These were published in a two-volume reader that was used in general education programs at colleges throughout the country.[30]

Columbia social scientists perceived that the value of this historical course to the education of citizens was twofold. First, it communicated to students the important values of their Western heritage. They wanted students to understand "that we live in a free society in which the spirits of justice, love, and scientific inquiry have been the

[28]Harvard University, *General Education in a Free Society*, 214.

[29]Jaleh Poorooshasb, "Beer's Soc Sci 2 Comes to a Close with Last Lecture," *Harvard Crimson*, May 5, 1978, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1978/5/5/beers-soc-sci-2-comes-to/.

[30]Harry J. Carman and Louis M. Hacker, "General Education in the Social Sciences in Columbia College," in McGrath, *Social Sciences in General Education*, 18–21. For a description of Columbia's complete general education program in the post-war period, see Committee on College Plans, Columbia University, *A College Program in Action: A Review of Working Principles at Columbia College* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946). Also see, Daniel Bell and David B. Truman, *The Reforming of General Education: The Columbia College Experience in Its National Setting* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

touchstones to social invention." They also hoped students would see "that in such a society the individual has labored to achieve freedom from an unreasoning authority (whether ecclesiastical or political); and that in a climate of experimental science, technology, and liberal-capitalist institutions, man consciously shapes his world to achieve welfare for himself and for constantly growing numbers of the human race." Second, by knowing their history and the values created and defended by their ancestors, Columbia social scientists believed that their students would better understand their contemporary world and choose wisely as they faced modern challenges:

> Given the necessity of making intelligent choices—between a voluntaristic and a dialectical interpretation of history, between authority and free association, between status and contrast, between rule by decree and the rule of law, for example—it follows educationally that the student is entitled to the kind of program which will best familiarize him with the experiences and achievements—in fact, the progress of—the Western civilization of which he is a part.[31]

Columbia believed that students who absorbed the historical struggle for freedom in the West would be more likely to protect and defend it for the future.

The Western Civilization course appealed to social scientists for several reasons. In addition to being taught at some of the most respected universities in the country, its structure conferred legitimacy. By assigning classical texts, faculty could imply that these courses carried forward the original tradition of liberal arts education and represented a continuation of the classical curriculum (although it was nothing like it) brought to North America by European settlers who founded the nation's oldest colleges. It promised to restore cultural unity in a period of increasing cultural pluralism. It relied on a familiar pedagogy, since at most schools, lectures were a dominant feature of the course. Traditionalists, such as Clarence Faust, the dean of the college at the University of Chicago, who understood the responsibility of college teachers as "the intellectual development of our students, or more precisely the development of their capacity for thinking and judgment," could embrace the "Western Civilization" model.[32]

The characteristics that made the Western Civilization course appealing to some social scientists made others view it as problematic. The new consensus that the purpose of general education was the education of democratic citizens strengthened the position of faculty who were influenced by progressive educational theories. Faust's colleague, the psychologist Robert Havighurst, argued that "the broad social loyalties necessary for intelligent citizenship in the modern world cannot be gained simply by reading books." General education courses, he asserted, also needed teach "social adjustment" and "social loyalties."[33] This desired "social adjustment" required engaging students' full selves, their emotions, their capacity for empathy, and their values as well as their intellect. To do this, educators believed that courses needed

[31] Carman and Hacker, "General Education in the Social Sciences in Columbia College," 19, 16.

[32] Clarence H. Faust, "General Education: Its Nature and Purposes," in Morse, *General Education in Transition*, 60. See also Westbury and Purves, *Cultural Literacy and the Idea of General Education*.

[33] Robert J. Havighurst, "Emotional Outcomes of General Education," *Journal of General Education* 1, no. 1 (Oct. 1946): 42–43.

to focus on relevant topics and use materials and activities that brought students in as close contact with the issues being studied as possible. They believed students needed to be motivated to become good citizens, and knowledge alone would not do this.

Proponents of the new "Western Civilization" courses acknowledged this. They did not want those courses to be traditional history courses in which students learned a lot of information about the past. "In a historical introductory course," explained E. O. Golob, an assistant professor at Wesleyan University, "there would be attention to chronological continuity. But in the social science introductory course there isn't necessarily a focus on continuity. Instead, it emphasizes the interrelationship between social fact and theory."[34] At Northwestern University, the first of its two social science general education courses covered "the great civilizations of antiquity, and the Medieval and Renaissance periods of European history." But unlike a traditional history course, it treated Western society as just one example of how humans have adjusted to the world in which they live. Students were taught to analyze human cultures as distinct responses to the natural environment and the by-products of the "psychological forces that lie at the base of human behavior." The course also encouraged introspection and hoped students would understand "the roots of our system of values, our beliefs, and our accepted modes of behavior."[35] These courses were not supposed to be traditional lecture courses with quiz sections in which students learned and regurgitated facts about the past. Faculty who taught these courses pointed to the importance of reading original texts and discussing them freely, arguing that this was a kind of active learning, engaging students directly with fundamental questions of human existence.

But still, some social scientists thought this would not be sufficient to create democratic citizens. Influenced by progressive educational theories, they argued that the material was too remote and abstract to be effective as citizenship education. These social scientists pushed for a different type of general education curriculum, one centered around the "Contemporary Social Problems" course. Dartmouth College was a prominent proponent of this type of course, offering its "Great Issues" course as a model for other institutions to imitate. "Great Issues" was required of all seniors and consisted of three sessions a week: a Monday night lecture by a distinguished guest discussing a specific issue, typically related to contemporary political, social, economic, or ethical problems of international significance; a Tuesday morning discussion with the guest and Dartmouth faculty member; and a Thursday morning "briefing" typically by a Dartmouth faculty member, to prepare students to comprehend the following Monday's talk. Students were presented with a series of contemporary problems involving foreign policy, race, civil liberties, education, and control of science. Students were instructed to regard guest speakers as distinguished leaders but not the final authority on an issue. Instead, students were supposed to cooperatively research the problems the speakers addressed to understand and evaluate competing

[34]E. O. Golob, "The Social Science Course at Wesleyan University," in McGrath, *Social Sciences in General Education*, 229.

[35]Melville J. Herskovits, "The Social Science Units of the Northwestern University Liberal Arts Program," *Journal of General Education* 1, no. 3 (April 1947), 219.

options, recognizing that there was not a single perfect answer to complex social problems.[36]

The course was structured to engage students in the authentic activities of citizenship. For example, students met together in one large group rather than in small discussion sections because as adults, they would participate in town halls and other public forums. Assigned readings were newspapers and magazines, the sources of information typically available to citizens. Students were expected to frequently visit the "Public Affairs Laboratory," a large room with comfortable chairs and newspapers and other resources they might find in a public library. To help students learn to evaluate biases in these sources of information, one course assignment required them to read about a single issue in multiple newspapers, including one known to be politically conservative, one liberal, and one viewed as politically objective. Students then had to write a paper analyzing how the different newspapers covered the topic, detecting bias and sifting out fact from opinion.[37]

While some schools, such as Cornell, did adopt the "Great Issues" model, many other institutions independently designed their own versions of the "Contemporary Social Problems" course. For example, Stephens College, a progressive women's college in Missouri, offered "Contemporary Social Issues," which aimed to "present a broad, integrated view of American society in its local and world setting." Social scientists who designed the course assumed that students were likely to be confused and troubled by the rapid social change they were experiencing. By helping them gain a comprehensive understanding of their world, the Stephens social science faculty believed that students would be able to confront these challenges in a constructive way. The course also sought to integrate the social sciences, train students for social leadership, and replace their parochial views with a "world" perspective. The course was taught from a "problems" approach, including units on issues such as crime, the changing family, racial and cultural minorities, regulation of business, economic inequality, labor unions, and world organizations.[38]

"Contemporary Social Problems" courses embraced pedagogies that encouraged active learning and course materials and activities that endeavored to give students a realistic and immediate sense of the issues being studied. These courses reduced or eliminated lectures—which many social scientists viewed as a passive form of learning—in favor of discussions and debates. Social scientists put a lot of stock in the value of discussion-based pedagogy. They believed that it had cognitive advantages—students would learn to think more clearly because they would be called upon to explain and justify their positions using evidence and reason. "The student is as often as possible placed in a position of intellectual responsibility where he must present data in support of his views and support them in logical fashion," explained Walter Fee, head of the Division of Social Science at Michigan State University. "In this kind of procedure, the student can be made clearly responsible for the soundness of his own

[36] Arthur M. Wilson, "The 'Great Issues' Course at Dartmouth College," *American Political Science Review* 43, no. 1 (Feb. 1949), 91–94.

[37] Wilson, "The 'Great Issues' Course at Dartmouth College," 91–94.

[38] John A. Decker, "The Contemporary Social Issues Course at Stephens College," in McGrath, *Social Sciences and General Education*, 210, 214.

thinking." Discussions also had political value: students learned to model the behavior they would use as citizens. The student discussion, Fee maintained, "is doing exactly what the citizen should do when he is called upon to decide difficult and controversial issues as a part of his civic responsibilities."[39] In addition, faculty thought discussions had more impact on students than lectures, because they were personally engaged. "The use of small group discussion appears to result in a situation more conducive to affecting attitudes than other commonly used techniques of instruction. This is because it makes it more difficult for the individual student to withdraw emotionally from the challenges to his value systems and his behavior which originate from the materials read and the arguments of his peers," explained Earl Edgar.[40] Thus, discussion had the power to transform students' attitudes and behaviors in way lectures did not.

Social scientists at University of Louisville tried to increase the power of discussions by giving students considerable control over them. "Instead of relying on their own organization, direction, and domination, teachers have welcomed student suggestions, criticism, and initiative—even waited for and induced them," explained Robert A. Warner, the faculty member who headed the division of the social sciences. The faculty divided their section into three smaller "committees or discussion groups," and these groups largely ran themselves. The professor visited the groups but avoided "interference and domination except to loosen up and personalize discussion and to improve group discussion by handling stalemates and personality clashes." The faculty believed that by stepping back, students would be more likely to reach their own convictions. Although this system might be less efficient, and students might not always come to solutions to the social problems on their own, it gave them practice in democratic processes and developed their respect for those processes. "Compared with the lecture," asserted Warner, "the method is radical; it is an effort to train for responsible democratic citizenship instead of inculcating a body of fact and abstract dogma. It is directed to student activity and emotional identification with courses of action rather than to learning alone."[41] Faculty conceived of these discussion groups as mock civic organizations in which students practiced the arts of reasoned persuasion and learned to recognize and defend what they thought about important issues.

To increase the value of discussions, faculty also changed the kind of readings that they assigned. They considered textbooks inappropriate because they were both authoritative and uninteresting. They were replaced by compilations of a variety of readings that, depending on the class, might include excerpts of classic texts, modern academic studies, government reports, and newspaper and magazine articles. Social scientists justified this practice, in part, as a way to introduce various perspectives so the student could consider, weigh, judge, and come to individual conclusions. They also believed it made the readings relevant and engaging. They incorporated film and other audiovisual materials for the same reason. Field trips were supposed to bring

[39]Walter Fee, "A General Education Course in Social Science at Michigan State College," in McGrath, *Social Sciences and General Education*, 121.

[40]Earl E. Edgar, "Values, Social Science, and General Education," *Journal of General Education* 5, no. 3 (April 1951), 179.

[41]Robert A. Warner, "General Education Courses in Social Science at the University of Louisville," in McGrath, *Social Sciences and General Education*, 32–34.

students into direct contact with social phenomena so they could develop their own unmediated analysis of them. When field trips were not possible, faculty tried to create vicarious experiences. For example, at Antioch College, the general education course "Economics of War and Peace" used "novels, illustrative material, and plays," such as *Grapes of Wrath, Native Son*, and *You Have Seen Their Faces*, to "broaden" students' experiences. These books were believed to provide something like direct knowledge of social phenomena, such as rural poverty and racial discrimination, on which students could form their own opinions. In addition, students responded enthusiastically to these materials and wanted to read more. "A rending of *The Grapes of Wrath*," C.D. Stevens of Antioch College suggested., "leads to a study of Carey McWilliams' *Factories in the Field* and *Ill Fares the Land*." Students' own personal responses were supplemented by other perspectives. "It is, of course, important, once student experience has been broadened by fiction," another instructor explained, "to direct the interests thus created into more serious vein."[42] While academic material would be incorporated, students were encouraged to begin with their own "first-hand" knowledge.

Another device for giving students vicarious experience was the introduction of the "case method" to social science general education courses. When Harvard created its general education program in 1946, Wallace Donham, the former dean of the Harvard Business School, introduced an experimental general education course entitled "Human Relations." Cases were intended to provide students with an adequate substitute for direct experience. "A case, to us," Donham explained, "is the nearest we can come to transposing a segment of reality into the classroom." To develop the class, he and his associates prepared cases that dealt with "families, veterans, colleges, hospitals, community funds, and the like."[43] Soon after the course was launched, Donham created a program for visiting educators to learn to apply the case method in courses at their schools.

Colgate University social scientists participated in the program and soon began using the case method in its general education course, "Public Affairs." They wrote their own cases, including one that involved a veteran, Merritt Hunter, who has fallen in love with a Belgian woman and wants to marry her but is having difficulty getting permission for her to leave and move to the US. The case focused on the dilemma an American official faced over how he should intervene. He knew Hunter was mixed-race and wondered whether he should share that information with Belgian officials. Colgate educators explained the value of such a case:

> When we are confronted with a specific situation from society with as rich detail as is feasible to reproduce, we react to that situation in terms of our own experiences, our beliefs, emotions, our prejudices. To say that there is *one* answer to Merritt Hunter's problem is doctrinaire. However, to the extent to which we can engage freely in the discussion of Hunter's problems with our equals, we will be helped to understand the ideas of others *and to understand ourselves*. It is because

[42]C. D. Stevens, "Analysis for a Social Science Class," in *General Education in the Social Studies*, vol. 3, ed. Albert William Levi (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1948), 214.

[43]Wallace Brett Donham, George F. F. Lombard, and George F. Baker, "An Experimental Course in Human Relations in Harvard College," *Journal of General Education* 2, no. 1 (Oct. 1947), 10 and 14.

> students in social science courses need and want to understand their relations to others in society that we want to help them. And we believe that that help can come best when students address themselves to concrete problems from our social life today.[44]

Colgate and other institutions that adopted the case method began with a concrete situation and then assigned academic materials to help students understand context and give them theoretical lenses to analyze the human dynamics in the case. This model, according to Hilden Gibson and Walter Sandelius of the University of Kansas, which also adopted Donham's model, allowed students to transcend "knowledge about" and achieve the deeper "knowledge of acquaintance," analogous to the way that clinical training in medicine necessarily supplemented classroom study of anatomy.[45]

The balance between concrete, realistic materials and academic theory varied from school to school. For example, at University of Chicago, David Reisman introduced Social Sciences 2, "Personality and Culture," with a section on race, assigning an excerpt from Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (a popular text in postwar social science general education classes) Combining works like Myrdal's with classic texts of social theory by Smith, Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Freud, Reisman explored questions of contemporary social theory, such as psychological mechanisms of prejudice and the nature of group personality, with his students. Despite this theoretical bent, Reisman believed that students gained self-understanding in the class. "Gradually, with good luck," Reisman wrote, "it may become possible for students to look at their own feelings with less shame and to realize that hardly anyone in the culture … escapes some feelings of anti-Negro prejudice." He hoped that students would gain the ability to confront "their own self-contradictions … both in class and out of class."[46] While the exact mix of academic research, social theory, empirical data, and exposure to lived experiences varied from institution to institution, faculty who designed these courses aimed to introduce students to core social scientific concepts and social theory while also trying to get them to engage on a personal level with contemporary social issues.

The topics covered also varied, as social scientists who designed these courses believed that students would be more interested in issues close to their personal experience, and thus that the curriculum should be adapted to the backgrounds of the students. "For the Puerto Ricans, one might place considerable stress on colonialism, little on racial discrimination," argued political scientist Louis A. Dexter. "With physics majors, one might spend extra time on the sociology of science, while with liberal arts students at American universities one might substitute Keynesian economic theory."[47]

[44]Sidney J. French and Wendell H. Bush, "General Education in Social Science at Colgate University," in McGrath, *Social Sciences and General Education*, 189.

[45]Hilden Gibson and Walter Sandelius, "General Education in the Social Sciences at the University of Kansas," in McGrath, *Social Sciences and General Education*, 151.

[46]David Reisman, "Some Problems of a Course in 'Culture and Personality,'" *Journal of General Education* 5, no. 2 (Jan. 1951), 129.

[47]Lewis A. Dexter, "On the Construction of Social Science General Courses," *Journal of General Education* 2, no. 3 (April 1948), 224.

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Colleges located in rural areas would put more stress on problems of agriculture and those serving working-class students would deal extensively with union issues. Some social scientists suggested that colleagues get to know their students by administering surveys at the beginning of their courses asking about students' social background, religion, and views on key subjects so that they could adjust their teaching to those specific students. This reflected a widespread view that effective citizenship training had to be tailored to the assumptions and beliefs students brought to the classroom and to the circumstances that they would encounter as citizens.

Customization reflected the broad reach of these ideas in higher education. While elite private institutions often received the most attention, social scientists across a wide range of institutions, including flagship state universities, small rural colleges, urban universities serving commuter students, and both predominantly White and historically Black institutions, revised their general education courses with the aim of more effectively preparing students for citizenship. In 1947, Irving A. Derbigny, then administrative dean at Tuskegee Institute, published a study of general education programs at twenty "Negro Colleges" (today referred to as HBCUs). Derbigny, like his counterparts at the ACE, assumed the tripartite division of general education in the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. He found that social science faculty at all twenty institutions viewed "the development of good citizenship" as the primary purpose of their general education courses, and that many schools were in the process of revising their courses to better achieve this goal. Derbigny, reflecting the broader educational debates, divided courses into two categories, those that emphasized "knowledge" versus those that were "problem-centered" and emphasized "use." He clearly favored the latter, writing, "If transmission of knowledge encompasses the entire purpose of the social-science course, then the experience is certainly sterile and social lag is inevitable." At the time of his study, he categorized 54 percent of the courses as "problem-centered" and 46 percent as "knowledge-centered" but noted that several institutions were still revising their curricula.[48]

Despite this customization, the topics covered in these courses converged quite a bit. ACE researchers did a content analysis of the social science general education courses offered by the seventeen schools that participated in the social science part of their evaluation study. Ten or more of the colleges addressed the following concerns in their classes: "international affairs, labor, American values, comparative systems, race and minorities, and civil liberties." Only three were addressed at five or fewer institutions: "crime, mental abnormalities, and natural resources and conservation." This reflected a high degree of agreement among social scientists about the key concerns of midcentury American politics.[49]

While some institutions adopted either the "Western Civilization" course, with its historical content and cognitive approach, or the "Contemporary Social Problems"

[48]Irving Antony Derbigny, *General Education in the Negro College* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1947), 156, 158, 162. Derbigny picked his twenty institutions to represent the full range of HBCUs. The schools in the McGrath collection and in the ACE study represent a wide range of predominantly White institutions.

[49]Dressel and Mayhew, *General Education*, 41.

course, with its current content and psycho-social approach, many schools embraced both. At Columbia, an institution strongly associated with the "Western Civilization" course, two-thirds of the required second-year course was devoted to contemporary political and economic problems. This part of the program consisted solely of discussion sections, dispensing with lectures altogether. Special care was taken to find faculty willing to "give up part of their interest in specialization" and engage in a great deal of preparation to teach across "such a diversified field." The students were also required to take field trips to factories, stores, and government institutions and report on them. Columbia employed a special staff member to coordinate these visits and to prepare visual aids for the course. This part of the course was nearly identical to the "Contemporary Social Problems" courses taught at colleges like Stephens.[50] Indeed, many social scientists believed that effective citizenship education needed to be both historical and contemporary. The ACE social science committee recommended a two-year general education program that included a historical section, a section covering basic social theory, and a longer section addressing contemporary social and political problems. Instead of arguing over the best type of course, the committee suggested that colleges require students both to study the history of Western Civilization to appreciate the values of democracy and to engage with contemporary problems to learn how to effectively apply those values.[51]

Not all colleges, however, required students take a full two-year social science general education sequence. Some of these institutions allowed students to choose between historical or contemporary courses. Harvard followed this path. Although the Harvard report, *General Education in a Free Society*, recommended a historical course entitled "Western Thought and Institutions," Harvard social science faculty did not settle on a single version of the social science general education requirement. There were proponents of both historical and contemporary approaches. Instead of offering only one version of the course, the Harvard social scientists designed four courses, aligned along a continuum ranging from primarily historical to primarily contemporary, and allowed students to choose among them. While "Social Science One" was an adaptation of a traditional European history course, "Social Science Four," the most contemporary of the courses, was organized around a series of issues, including "technology and science, economic organization, social stratification, political organization, and religious and secular thought."[52]

Many social science general education courses were actually hybrid courses: primarily contemporary courses included elements common to historical courses and vice versa. For example, Walter Fee at Michigan State explained the orientation of the school's general education course: "Our concern is primarily with the present. Enough historical material is introduced, however, to make it apparent that significant current issues have roots which determine their changing character."[53] At Knox College, social

[50]Carman and Hacker, "General Education," in McGrath, *Social Sciences and General Education*, 25–26.

[51]Levi, *General Education in the Social Studies*, 227–305.

[52]David Owen, "Harvard General Education in Social Science," *Journal of General Education* 5, no. 1 (Oct. 1950), 26.

[53]Fee, "A General Education Course in Social Science at Michigan State College," 117.

scientists believed that students would be most engaged by material with which they had personal connection, so they designed a course focused on the Midwest. But even with this local orientation, course organizers took care to ensure that the social science section of the class tied "the region into the history of Europe." While "Contemporary Social Problems" courses were different from "Western Civilization" classes, social scientists who designed these courses agreed that students needed to know something about the past.[54]

In addition, instructors who taught "Contemporary Social Problems" courses often assigned the same classical social theory used in "Western Civilization" courses. Syracuse University, for example, required all freshmen in the School of Liberal Arts to enroll in a course entitled "Problems of Democratic Citizenship." The course addressed several contemporary issues such as race and equality of opportunity, international relations, and atomic energy. The longest section of the courses focused on "Freedom from Want." The course instructors explained that it considered both "the problem of economic insecurity" and "the procedures of action" to address the problem. For practical solutions, the instructors focused on "the Wagner Act, including the conditions and steps leading to its passage and replacement." As the title promised, the course emphasized realistic solutions to immediate political problems. But the course also raised theoretical questions and assigned classic texts by Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, and James Madison as well the writings of contemporary figures such as Erich Fromm and John Dewey. While the course addressed an array of contemporary policy issues, it also involved students in more abstract discussions about human nature, society, and democracy.[55]

For faculty teaching "Western Civilization" general education courses, the history of Europe was a means to the same ends as those of other kinds of social science general education. Samuel Beer, who taught "Social Science Two" at Harvard, the most popular of Harvard's general education options, maintained that the course was only incidentally historical. It followed a chronological structure, beginning with Anglo-Saxon society and moving forward in time to address selected historical topics such as the rise of Parliament, the Puritan Revolution, the Age of Louis the XIV, and Germany under Bismarck. The choice of topics reflected Beer's own interests and expertise, but he did not view knowledge of history as the aim of the course. "My task, as I see it," Beer explained, "is to stimulate and help the student to think systematically about certain great issues… . I have no doubt that another teacher might use only contemporary materials and yet give a course concerned with essentially the same problems and producing not greatly dissimilar results." The course in Beer's view was not about European history; historical topics were vehicles to explore enduring problems of humankind, and the ultimate purpose of the course, according to Beer, was to inspire in his students an understanding and love of liberty.[56]

[54]Carter Davidson, "The College of Modern Democracy," *Journal of Higher Education* 13, no. 4 (April 1942), 177.

[55]Michael O. Sawyer and Stuart Gerry Brown, "Problems in Democratic Citizenship," *Journal of Higher Education* 23, no. 2 (Feb. 1952), 84–88, 116.

[56]Samuel H. Beer, "Social Sciences 2 at Harvard," in McGrath, *Social Sciences in General Education*, 4–6.

Conclusion

In the 1930s and 1940s, motivated by the threat to democracy, social scientists took a leading role in the general education movement. At institutions across the United States they designed new general education courses—some primarily historical, some largely contemporary, and some a combination of both—but all aimed at preparing students to be democratic citizens. These courses adopted active learning pedagogies, such as discussion and debate, designed to help students think for themselves and develop skills necessary to participate in public affairs. They replaced traditional textbooks with a variety of primary sources, from philosophical treatises to daily newspapers. Many of the social scientists teaching these courses were influenced by progressive educational theories and sought to make the courses as relevant and as based in contemporary reality as possible.

These courses were designed before the fears about the future of democracy morphed into the Cold War and continued to be taught until the full impact of that shift was felt in higher education. Eventually, though, the Cold War would create conditions hostile to many of these courses. Progressive education became associated with radicalism at a time when higher education leaders acquiesced to political pressure to rid their faculties of suspected radicals.[57] Social scientists increasingly adopted models that reduced social phenomena to individual behavior and sought objectivity through quantification.[58] Academic departments were becoming more entrenched as professors increasingly identified with their disciplines rather than the colleges and universities that employed them.[59] At the height of the Cold War, research that aimed to help the US contain the spread of communism and advance military technology would become the primary way that American universities contributed to the defense of democracy.[60]

While the environment that drew social scientists to general education would be gone by the mid-1950s, the ideals that animated their courses would come back in the context of the student protests of the 1960s and 1970s. In the immediate aftermath of the Free Speech Movement at UC Berkeley in 1964, students and faculty would come together to call for curricular reform, drawing on models forged decades

[57] Arthur Zilversmit, *Changing Schools: Progressive Education Theory and Practice, 1930-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Stuart J. Foster, *Red Alert!: Educators Confront the Red Scare in American Public Schools, 1947-1954* (New York: P. Lang, 2000); Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[58] See note 8.

[59] Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske, *American Academic Culture in Transformation: Fifty Years, Four Disciplines* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[60] Rebecca S. Lowen, *Creating the Cold War University: The Transformation of Stanford* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Stuart W. Leslie, *The Cold War and American Science: The Military-Industrial-Academic Complex at MIT and Stanford* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Ron Theodore Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Intellectual Complex* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Noam Chomsky, *The Cold War & the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York: The New Press, 1997); Christopher Simpson, *Universities and Empire: Money and Politics in the Social Sciences during the Cold War* (New York: New Press, 1998); Ethan D. Schrum, *The Instrumental University: Education in Service of the National Agenda after World War II* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Loss, *Between Citizens and the State*.

earlier. The call for a "relevant" curriculum would become a common cry of student activists.[61] Activists would successfully create new programs in areas such as "Black Studies," "Third World Studies," and "Woman's Studies."[62] These programs, like the "Contemporary Social Issues" courses that preceded them, had an explicit political purpose and aimed to connect students to the world outside the academy.

These programs, of course, have been contested since they were first proposed. The conflict over them has largely been understood as cultural, a fight over whether American identity would be tied to White, Protestant European culture and values or would be broadened to honor Indigenous, African, and other migrant contributions. Viewing the conflict as a matter of culture focuses attention on general education programs in the humanities, the strand where Great Books courses dominated. By uncovering the general education programs' social science courses, we can see that the conflict was not only about culture but was also connected to the nature of political education offered in colleges and universities. Mid-twentieth-century social science general education was a response to authoritarian governments using schools as propaganda to forge loyal, submissive subjects. American educators sought to create a different form of political education that would shape independent-minded citizens who would freely commit themselves to American democracy. This is an aim still worth fighting for.

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[61] Julie Reuben, "Reforming the University: Student Protests and the Demand for a 'Relevant' Curriculum," in *Student Protest the Sixties and After*, ed. Gerard J. DeGroot (London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 153-68; Julie Reuben, "The Limits of Freedom: Student Activists and Educational Reform at Berkeley in the 1960s," in *The Free Speech Movement: Reflections on Berkeley in the 1960s*, ed. Robert Cohen and Reginald E. Zelnik (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 485–508.

[62] On the history of these programs, see Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2012); Marilyn J. Boxer, *When Women Ask the Questions: Creating Women's Studies in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Mari Jo Buhle and Florence Howe, *The Politics of Women's Studies: Testimony from Thirty Founding Mothers* (New York: Feminist Press, 2000).

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