Transformation through Adaptation: Making General Education Exciting, Relevant, & Imperative

Dr. Amy Sloan & Dr. Jerrod McLeeland
Colorado Technical University

General Education in Crisis
- Higher education faces intense scrutiny in America, where education is being seen as a commodity designed for students as consumers (Harris, 2006).
- There is a pervasive sense, especially with policymakers, that General Education is “unnecessary at best and useless at worst” (Wintreld, 2014, p. 129) and does not provide the career and professional readiness today’s students seek (Adler-Kassner, 2014).
- Students often see General Education courses as outside of their area of interest and something they just have to “get out of the way” (Pogrebin & Clements, 2013).
- Yet, more than 85% of college and university have general education requirements (Hachtmann, 2012).
- As Austin (2016) argues, “well-designed general education programs have the potential to address some of the most crucial issues that higher education faces.”

Gen Ed for Returning Learners
- “21st century learning involves both the mastery of industry-specific skills and knowledge as well as nuanced capacities to define problems spaces innovatively, compare phenomena critically, communicate in a wide variety of media with a variety of technologies, and learn continuously” (Lambert, 2012, p. 83-84).
- At its roots, General Education is designed to foster skills students need for both academic and professional success (Vander Schier, 2011), skills returning learners often desperately need to succeed as a student and a professional.
- Professional accreditors regularly include “broad liberal education skills and competencies in their assessment criteria,” (Schernd, 2016, p. 18), and these are skills targeted by General Education courses.

Adapting to Student Needs & Motives
Colorado Technical University is an institution of higher learning that caters primarily to career-motivated students, typically returning learners. CTU offers these students advanced technology and an innovative approach to career preparation by building students’ skills, knowledge, confidence, experience, and marketability.

Other than, however, as returning learners, when students enter into their programs, they have squandered their education into schedules pre-packed with jobs and family responsibilities. They often face major challenges in areas like health and finances. And, they find themselves intimidated and lacking confidence in their abilities to succeed at a postsecondary level.

During enrollment they are not envisioning the 1st and 2nd year general education courses that begin their program. They don’t picture themselves taking composition, history, sociology, communications, or even science, and they don’t understand how these courses have relevance for meeting their goals.

This too often leads to a lack of motivation. If this population of students fails to see real-life relevance in their courses, they can quickly become disengaged, so the challenge set for CTU’s General Education department has been made our courses exciting, relevant, imperative.

CTU General Education Success Strategies:
- Purposeful connection of curriculum to students’ fields of study.
- Introduction of adaptive learning technology so students demonstrate mastery of previously developed skills and concentrate on areas of need.
- Deliberate focus on knowledge transfer and skill relevance.
- Foster ease of access for students increased use of mobile technology.
- Intentional faculty engagement designed to foster knowledge and build confidence.
- Focus on real-life applications for all course objectives.

First Year Writing: A Case Study
In 2016, we reimagined our first year writing program to emphasize developing writing skills critical to personal, professional, and academic success. We wanted to prepare our students for the common writing challenges and opportunities they might one day encounter. The first courses emphasize the development of the sentence, paragraph, and formal persuasive essay. The second course is now designed to cultivate an understanding of audience, purpose, and platform and to develop research skills such as determining source credibility, crediting sources, and utilizing citation tools. The writing done in this course hinges on developing an appropriate digital identity and constructing an appropriately professional understanding of social media and internet research. The early results of these courses have shown students find it engaging, relevant, and helpful for their careers, as seen in these comments from the student End of Course Survey feedback: “Being a business major I thought this was a really interesting course to add to the menu. I really enjoyed it.”

“’The assignments were tough and challenging but upon completion I felt like I had actually learned something that I will carry over into [the] future.”

References

CTU Successes
Using a mission driven approach that combines curriculum and instructional innovation, CTU’s General Education Department was able to demonstrate significant improvements in multiple content areas in 2016.

Science:
- Introduction to the Sciences and Environmental Science saw a 14% and 11% increase respectively in year over year student success rates.

Sociology:
- Introductory Sociology saw a 14% increase in year over year student success rates and performance over 2016 benchmark goal.

English:
- Introductory Written Communication saw a 16% increase in year over year student success rates and performance over 2016 benchmark goal.