

# HOW CAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS CREATE A MEANINGFUL GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM?

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Students enrolled in general education courses cultivate understanding of critical [social issues](#). Throughout the general education curricula, students take courses from a wide array of disciplines and on various topics. The goal is to [develop an understanding of multiple schools of thought and civic knowledge and values](#).

For instance, [Hiram College](#) structures their general education curriculum through the two following concepts: [ways of knowing](#), through creative, interpretive, modeling, experimental scientific, and social and cultural analysis methods; and, [ways of developing responsible citizenship](#), through an understanding of international issues and foreign cultures, diversity within the United States, as well as meaning, ethics and social responsibility.

According to a [2015 Association of American Colleges & Universities report](#) of member institutions, general education courses heavily involve applied learning experiences (67%). These data also suggest that several colleges and universities incorporate first-year seminars (63%) and interdisciplinary courses (55%) as part of the general education curriculum. Despite these modifications, many still perceive the topics covered and knowledge acquired in general education courses as not entirely useful.

So, what is the best solution to teach students important skills while designing a general education curriculum that is relevant? I argue that colleges and universities can align curricula with the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals \(UNSDGS\)](#). The UNSDGS has 17 Goals that improve human quality of life in a variety of areas, such as good health and well-being; sustainable communities and cities; climate action; peace, justice, and strong institutions. Many students arrive at college from communities where climate change is having a negative impact on their physical and social well-being. In recent years, marginalized communities have witnessed increased participation in addressing needs and [challenges](#). Further, environmental activism among youth has also increased, as they are [both heirs and future shapers of environmental health](#). The crux of sustainability education is [social impact on economic and political structures to attain equality](#).

A sustainability-based approach to general education has two main advantages. First, sustainability education brings disciplinary experts from their silos to inform student learning. As higher education has become progressively focused on creating a sustainable future, institutions can simultaneously leverage pre-existing knowledge and experiences of students to bolster the general education curriculum to help students creatively address world issues.

Second, having sustainability-driven general education curricula teaches student about the challenges and equips them with the skills to approach "[wicked problems](#)" (i.e., challenges that are 'open-ended, conflict-rich, unique, and dynamic'). In other words, wicked problems do not have a direct answer but are multi-layered and require intense critical thinking. Higher education institutions should design curricula based on the premise of developing students that are deliberate, thoughtful, and able to draw literature from multiple fields of study.

As a reader of this essay, I ask you to think about the general education courses you completed as a student. How did they prepare you to tackle societal problems? Were you wanting a more meaningful experience? A sustainability-based general education offers our institutions an opportunity to restructure general education in the 21st century.

Academic leaders looking to support their general education curricula with sustainability science can align their existing courses and campus programs. These courses are in the humanities, social sciences, and biological

and physical sciences—bringing multiple disciplines together. General education is vital to the undergraduate student experience, and the skills fostered during the first years of general education are needed for major courses; in campus clubs and organizations; for internships and jobs; and being a good citizen in society.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lance Kyle Bennett is a Visiting Scholar with the Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity, and Justice at Rutgers Graduate School of Education. Currently, he serves as the Assistant Director of Assessment for the Office of the Provost at The University of Texas at Dallas. He embraces a scholar-practitioner approach to the study of higher education. His research examines how institutional effectiveness professionals communicate data to campus constituencies (e.g., faculty, staff, and students).

One of his favorite aspects of higher education is building bridges between executive leadership and various campus constituencies. Lance exercised this skill while serving on the Faculty Senate and as Co-Chair of the Contingent Faculty Committee at St. Edward's University. In this capacity, Lance developed communication channels with senior leaders and adjunct faculty. Throughout his time in the academy, Lance has received research grants; published peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters; and obtained teaching certificates. Lance is a graduate of Delaware County Community College

(A.A.), Eastern University (B.A.), West Chester University (M.A.), University of Iowa (M.A.) with studies in interpersonal and organizational communication. He is currently an Ed.D. candidate in Higher Education Leadership at St. Edward's University.

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