Chapter 4
Emotionally Strong Leadership and the Revision of General Education

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ABSTRACT

The landscape of higher education in the United States is continually evolving, with the recent disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic emphasizing the need for adaptable and student-centered curricula. At the heart of undergraduate education, general education programs play a crucial role in providing students with a broad foundation of knowledge and skills that transcend disciplinary boundaries. However, challenges in designing, communicating, and assessing the value of general education arise in almost every institutional context. This chapter examines the urgency for timely and accelerated gen ed revisions, the obstacles faced by institutions, and the potential of emotionally strong leadership informed by principles of emotional intelligence (EI) to drive expedited and meaningful curricular innovation. Through an in-depth case study of a small private liberal arts college, the chapter explores how emotionally strong leadership can facilitate effective and accelerated change in the midst of traditional shared governance structures.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States system of Higher Education, General Education serves as a central element of the undergraduate curriculum that connects all students irrespective of major program of study. General Education provides opportunities for institutions

to infuse mission-driven outcomes that can demonstrate the value of education to students, faculty, and other stakeholders. However, to effectively design, communicate, and assess that value in a post-COVID operational context may require a wholesale curricular revision. Recent national data shows only 32% of students are estimated to understand their institution's General Education outcomes (IHE 2022). Since at least 1984, when Jerry Gaff published *General Education Today* and, in 1994, wrote the prologue to the Association of American Colleges paper "Strong Foundations: Twelve Principles for Effective General Education Programs," institutions have been grappling with how to design, implement, and sustain a general education curriculum that works and matters to students.

Change in General Education may need to be initiated due to outdated curriculum, curricular complexity, or assessment and accreditation pressures. Yet General Education revisions are notorious for requiring several years to complete, miring institutions of higher education in a contentious curricular slog (Gaston & Gaff 2009). Resistance to change and conflict emerge for many reasons, such as fear of enrollment decline or philosophical differences, and can be anticipated as part of this process (Gaston & Gaff 2009). The complexity and slow pace of the revision process within shared governance structures means institutions may lag behind real-time opportunities to innovate. Small and tuition-driven institutions face the most pressure to innovate quickly to attract and retain students in a highly competitive educational market. As small colleges continue to close their doors due to financial and demographic pressures, it has become increasingly clear that a multi-year revision process is a luxury that institutions cannot afford. The question then becomes how to best accelerate meaningful change within the existing operational and governance structures traditional to institutions of higher education.

This chapter draws on an example of General Education revision process at a small, private, rural-serving liberal arts college in the Northeast region of the United States. A revised General Education blueprint with new requirements was developed and overwhelmingly approved by faculty in less than one academic year. Leaders of this change process relied on Emotional Intelligence (EI)-informed approaches within a broader project management framework to intentionally achieve an accelerated timeline. Emotionally strong change leadership plays a significant role in driving, shaping, and supporting large-scale curricular change. It leverages elements of EI to effectively navigate the polarity between tradition and the imperative of student-centered institutional innovation.

While EI research has been popularized since the 1990s (Goleman 1995), there has been little discussion of the role of EI in the process of General Education revision to date. Emotionally strong leadership includes providing vision and purpose, engaging in effective communication, adapting through ambiguity and supporting a

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