

Introduction to General Education Mission and Goals

Introduction

Partly in response to a Middle States recommendation, the Task Force on General Education was constituted under the Office of the Provost in Spring '06 and charged to review and develop a plan for assessing general education at Pratt.

What is general education?

General education refers to the part of an undergraduate curriculum that ensures that the students become well-rounded and broadly educated through exposure to multiple disciplines. Through general education students acquire the broad basic knowledge, transferable intellectual and practical competencies, attitudes, and sense of values that **all** students, regardless of their chosen field, will need in their professional and personal lives.

General education usually comprises:

- informed acquaintance with the content, methods, and perspectives of liberal arts and sciences disciplines, history of art and design, and in the case of schools like Pratt, visual literacy.
- development of competencies such as logical, critical, and creative thinking, ability to communicate effectively, quantitative skills, moral reasoning, and ability to effectively locate and use information.

Why are we looking at General Education now?

- Middle States mandate to review the general education program
- Our own perception that there is a need for institute-wide self-reflection and general agreement on what, beyond expertise in their major, **all** students who graduate from Pratt should know and be able to do in order to live and work effectively in today's fast-changing world.
- Opportunity to examine of how well we are preparing students for the 21st century and make necessary changes in general education curricula, pedagogy, and structures.
- Need to integrate the education provided by the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, History of Art and Design, Foundation, and the majors to offer a coherent, challenging educational experience to our students.

What do we focus on at Pratt?

General education at Pratt is provided mainly by courses and programs outside of the professional majors--Liberal Arts and Sciences, Foundation, and History of Art and Design—and by co-curricular learning activities. However, the curriculum and pedagogy in the disciplines can and do contribute to the acquisition of some general education competencies, such as working collaboratively to solve problems.

In developing the draft mission statement and goals for general education at Pratt, our focus is on those courses and programs outside of the professional majors, but we refer to all aspects of the curriculum in our efforts to envision an integrated and challenging educational experience for all our undergraduates. The only really clear distinction between the professional component and the “general” component is not in what is studied and practiced, but in what curriculum (and other

activities) is within the major course of study and what is outside it. The kinds of critical thinking and creative practice articulated and implied in the elements of an undergraduate education in art, design, and architecture are multiple and overlapping.

Why is general education important and why should you care?

- General education is what makes *college* education different from specialized vocational training. Undergraduate college education comprises both, in-depth study in at least one field **and** "General Education." A coherent, well-rounded undergraduate education is possible only through the integration of discipline-specific and more general knowledge.
- General Education is necessary to prepare students to live and work effectively in today's complex and ever changing world: rapidly changing disciplines and technologies and need for flexibility; increasingly interdependent world and increased international competition; etc.
- Artists, designers, architects and other creative professionals need more than professional skills to actively and effectively participate in the world today. They need to be able to evaluate information, think critically and creatively, and communicate effectively.
- Accreditors: Accrediting agencies—Middle States, NASAD, NAAB, etc—as well as the New York State Education Department (NYSED) recognize that general education requires that all undergraduate programs leading to BA, BFA, or similar degrees include a general education component.

The accrediting organizations differ in the details but agree on the overall principles as to what "general education" is. All distinguish general education as a program distinct from the student's major course of study, though our accreditors agree that important elements of non major work are also to be found in the major. As the MSCHE *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education* puts it, "Institutions offering the associate and baccalaureate degrees will strike an appropriate balance between specialized and more general knowledge." (p. 37)

NASAD standards for general education (which they call "general studies") are of particular relevance to Pratt's assessment of its general education program, because they have very specific things to say about what a general education program should be and should achieve specifically in a college of art and design. General education, according to the NASAD 2005-2006 *Handbook*, is an integral component of undergraduate studies in Art and Design, because "artists and designers must develop an understanding of other areas of human achievement." (p. 64)

Briefly, the primary purposes of studies in art and design are to prepare students to become visually literate; develop visual, verbal, and written responses to visual phenomena; develop the capacity to identify and solve problems in a variety of contexts, become familiar with and develop competence in a number of art or design techniques; become familiar with the major achievements in the history of art/design; understand and evaluate contemporary thinking about art or design; and make valid assessments of quality and effectiveness in design projects and works of art, especially their own. (p.64)

Again briefly, the principal goals of general education, according to NASAD, are the ability to think, speak and write clearly and effectively; an informed acquaintance with the mathematical and experimental methods of the physical and biological sciences; an ability to address culture and history from a variety of perspectives; basic understanding of and experience in thinking about moral and ethical problems; the ability to respect, understand, and evaluate work in a variety of

disciplines; the capacity to explain and defend one's views effectively and rationally; and an understanding of and experience in art forms other than the visual arts and design." (p.64)