

RESTORING THE MISSION: THE GENERAL EDUCATION ACT MODEL BILL PROPOSAL

WRITTEN BY **Thomas K. Lindsay, Ph.D.**
OCTOBER 2024

KEY POINTS

- A national survey shows that only one in three Americans knows that there are three branches of government in the American system.
- The same national survey reveals, “Only 46% of respondents believe the U.S. is performing well on the vital need to understand our system of government.”
- Three organizations, the National Association of Scholars, the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and the James G. Martin Center, have joined to produce a model proposal to restore the mission of American higher education: the “General Education Act.”
- The General Education Act would establish at one leading Texas public university a 42-hour General Education Core Curriculum that emphasizes American History, American Government, and Western Civilization.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For roughly the first 150 years of our republic, colleges and universities took seriously their role in preparing their students to become informed and effective voters and leaders. This preparation took the form of a required curriculum focused on (among other subjects) American history, American government, and Western Civilization. The American Academy employed such a curriculum due to its recognition that, as a nation of immigrants, our unity as a people depends on our shared knowledge of and commitment to the moral, political, and philosophic foundations of our way of life. Because we are governed by the U.S. Constitution, a crucial element of such an education focused on the Constitution’s intellectual antecedents as well as later reactions to it.

However, beginning about a half-century ago, a required core curriculum fell out of fashion at the overwhelming majority of institutions of higher education in America. The all-too-predictable result of this has been a marked decline in Americans’ civic literacy. The consequences have been devastating for students who (through no fault of their own) barely understand today what America is and what it was founded to be. It has also been devastating for this country’s future prospects; after all, students can hardly be expected to defend what they barely understand.

To restore the civic-education mission of our public universities, three organizations—the National Association of Scholars, the James G. Martin for Academic Renewal, and the Ethics and Public Policy Center—have crafted the “General Education Act,” which seeks to reinstitute a core curriculum and, therewith, to supply

once again what has been lacking in American higher education.

INTRODUCTION: THE CASE FOR CHANGE¹

According to the higher education reform organization, the James G. Martin Center, the American public rightly has lost confidence in the higher education establishment's judgment about the nature and purpose of general education (Kurtz et al., 2023). A recent national survey corroborates their claim (Belkin, 2023).

Over the past 60 years, American universities have largely abandoned traditional general education requirements that taught students common knowledge of the history, animating principles, and institutions of America and the West, as well as a genuine introduction to the natural sciences, mathematics, and English composition. In their place, our universities have substituted "distribution requirements," through which students choose from a "cafeteria-style" menu of courses. This lack of uniformity in substantive content undermines students' efforts to receive a well-rounded education.

Through such distribution requirements, universities largely abandoned their commitment to prepare our students to be free, self-governing citizens, replacing it with pre-professional preparation in the social or natural sciences. As a result, a recent nationwide survey attests to the following unhappy facts: "Only 46% of respondents believe the U.S. is performing well on the vital need to understand our system of government—a gap of 49 percentage points from the 95% who call it important for the nation's success" (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2024). The same survey found that "[one] in three did not know there are three branches of government" (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2024).

Universities can provide no greater benefit to their students than to teach them about their country

and its foundational principles. Unfortunately, our universities have been failing at this, although it is one of their core duties. To be sure, Americans now differ deeply about how best to teach the intellectual underpinnings and historical traditions of our country. While it is imperative that universities possess the academic freedom necessary to teach their students opposing points of view on these issues, our schools (given the limitations of time) can require only a limited number of general education courses. They must therefore choose which courses to require as essential components of higher education. Such choices reflect judgments about moral and political principles.

Today's professors' ideological preferences and devotion to specialized studies greatly distances them from the worldview grounding traditional general education. Such distance necessitates that the Texas Legislature clearly delineate the content of required general education courses. The model GEA provides a clear account of themes to be examined. Moreover, it establishes a new "School of General Education" at a leading public university. The new School of General Education will be charged with hiring a cohort of professors with proven expertise and interest in the traditional general education.

It needs to be noted that the value and importance of traditional liberal education transcends partisan politics and ideology. This is not a partisan issue. In point of fact, both the Left and Right seek insight from the tradition of classic liberal education, which is devoted to instructing students in the philosophic, moral, and political foundations of our way of life. Such an approach—and only such an approach—encourages and equips our students to form their own opinions through examining and weighing the validity of the cases made for all of the different approaches and viewpoints dominating national discussion in our day. The "raison d'être" of the School of General Education consists in its commitment to intellectual freedom, which depends on unfettered,

¹ This model proposal was jointly published by the Ethics and Public Policy Center, the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, and the National Association of Scholars. Stanley Kurtz, Jenna Robinson, and David Randall drafted the Act.

civil discussion of the many differences of opinion that always exist on any campus.

The GEA's requirements in no way contradict or even dilute attention to the universities' crucial role of career preparation for its students. None of the GEA's requirements reduce the time and courses students need to take in preparing for their post-graduation careers.

The Martin Center adds, "We have drafted GEA to be the first step of what should be a broader program of educational reform. It will take some years to establish the School at the flagship state university. As that is accomplished, we suggest the following complementary reforms:

- Consider establishing further Schools of General Education in other public institutions of higher education.
- Ensure that all core curriculum courses can be transferred throughout the state public university system.

- Foster dual credit courses in these core curriculum courses by supporting K-12 teacher professional development and other incentives to ensure that high school students can take as many general education courses as possible before going to college.
- Select an accreditor for the flagship state university whose mission and experience suits it to accredit a traditional liberal arts core curriculum. ([Kurtz et al., 2023](#))

What will this change accomplish? According to its authors, "A properly supported School of General Education can remake our public universities into what they once were—the keystones of the American republic" ([Kurtz et al., 2023](#)).

I concur with this prediction. In my view, nothing less than the GEA can offer hope of restoring American universities' lost devotion to its civic-education mission.

Following is the updated (April 2024) version of the General Education Act ([Kurtz et al., 2023](#)).

MODEL LEGISLATIVE TEXT

WHEREAS, undergraduate students should acquire the knowledge that will help them to comprehend the foundational ideals and the workings of the American republic and of {State} to enable them to contribute to their country as informed, self-reliant, and public-spirited citizens; now therefore,

BE IT ENACTED:

SECTION A [School of General Education]

1. The {Board of Trustees} shall establish the School of General Education as an independent academic unit within the {Selected State University}. The School of General Education shall conduct teaching and research on the theory and practice of general education in the classic Western liberal arts tradition, and shall be responsible for designing and teaching all general education courses at the university, except for those in the sciences, mathematics, economics, or foreign languages.
2. The school shall establish bylaws requiring the school to do all of the following:
 - A. Educate students by means of free, open, and rigorous intellectual inquiry to seek the truth;
 - B. Affirm its duty to equip students with the civic and intellectual virtues they need to reach their own informed conclusions on matters of social and political importance;
 - C. Affirm the value of intellectual diversity in higher education and aspire to enhance the intellectual diversity of the university; and
 - D. Affirm a commitment to create a community dedicated to an ethic of civil and free inquiry, which respects the intellectual freedom of each member, supports individual capacities for growth, and welcomes the differences of opinion that shall naturally exist in a public university community.The requirement prescribed under divisions (A)(2)(a) to (d) of this section shall take priority over any other bylaws, mission statement, value, or other goal adopted by the school.
3. The school shall offer instruction in all of the following:
 - A. All undergraduate general education courses placed under the authority of the school by this act;
 - B. The books and major debates which form the intellectual foundations of free countries, especially that of the United States;
 - C. The principles, ideals, and institutions of law, liberty, and civic virtue that underpin the American constitutional order;
 - D. The foundations of public-spirited leadership and informed citizenship;
 - E. The books, major debates, history, and culture that have shaped ways of life and belief in the West, especially the West's enduring culture of liberty, with attention to culturally formative phenomena outside the West;
 - F. The Western tradition of liberal education, from its roots in ancient Greece through the theory and practice of liberal education in nineteenth-century America and Europe, to the present; and
 - G. The question of how best to extend and apply the tradition of classic liberal education to the present, at the undergraduate level, and in secondary and continuing education as well.
4. The School of General Education shall be an independent academic unit with the authority to house tenure-track faculty who hold their appointments within the school. Faculty appointed to the school shall not be required, but may, hold joint appointments within any other division of the university. Each

academic year the dean of the School of General Education shall propose the number of tenure-track faculty positions, lecturer positions, adjunct faculty positions, and graduate assistant positions that shall be allotted to teach under the school, subject to approval by the **{governing board}**. The dean of the school may approve the voluntary joint appointment of a faculty member housed within any other division of the university to the School of General Education for a term of up to three years, renewable at the discretion of the dean. No faculty outside of the school shall have the authority to block faculty hires or appointments into the school, the granting of tenure or promotion, or any other condition of faculty employment.

5. Only faculty appointments within the School of General Education may teach general education courses outside the areas of science, mathematics, economics, or foreign languages.
6. Not later than one full academic year after the passage of this act, a dean of the School of General Education shall be appointed.
7. Not later than two full academic years after passage of this act, entering freshmen at the university will be responsible for completing, prior to graduation, the following eight general education requirements as described in this act in Section B: Mathematics Required Course, Laboratory Science Required Course, Western History I, Western History II, United States History I, Introduction to Economics, Western Humanities I, and Western Humanities II. No later than two full academic years after passage of this act, the faculty of the School of General Education shall begin to teach the afore listed eight general education courses, except for those in mathematics, science, and economics.
8. Not later than three full academic years after passage of this act, entering freshmen at the university shall be responsible for completing, prior to graduation, all general education requirements imposed by this act in Section B. Not later than three full academic years after passage of this act, the School of General Education faculty shall begin to teach all those general education courses for which it is responsible, as specified in this act.
9. The School of General Education shall be administered by a dean, for whose hiring the president of the university has direct and sole responsibility, subject to approval by the **{governing board}**. The dean shall have the protection of tenure or tenure eligibility and shall report directly to the president of the university.
10. The Dean of the School of General Education shall have the authority to manage the recruitment and hiring process and to extend offers of employment, or joint appointment within the school, for all faculty and staff of the school, subject to approval by the university president and **{governing board}**. The dean may offer teaching and research positions, stipends, fellowships, awards, and any other form of remuneration to graduate students in any academic unit within the **{Selected State University}**, for a term of one year, renewable at the dean's discretion. The dean shall oversee and approve the development of the school's curriculum by the school's faculty, and ensure that the general education courses the school is responsible for are consistent with the terms of this act. The school shall be granted authority to offer courses and develop certificate, minor, and major programs as well as graduate programs, and offer degrees.
11. The Dean of the School of General Education shall submit an annual report to the **{university governing board}**, the **{governing board of the State Public University System}**, and to the general assembly. The report shall provide a full account of the school's budget, achievements, opportunities, challenges, and obstacles in the development of this academic unit.

12. The adoption of a specific set of graduation requirements organized around the history, great works, and civic culture of the West as a whole, and the United States in particular, constitutes a long-term, fundamental shift in the educational mission and strategy of the **{Selected State University}**. As the faculty and teaching duties of the School of General Education increase in size, the university shall reduce faculty in divisions outside the School of General Education to a corresponding degree, through program discontinuance or substantial curtailment, as deemed necessary by the **{governing board}**.
13. The **{governing board}** may, with appropriate notice, discharge any faculty member and eliminate the position when such an action is deemed necessary due to a budget or program decision regarding program discontinuance or substantial curtailment consequent to this act. Such decisions are the responsibility of the **{governing board}** alone and are not subject to faculty review.
14. Each chamber of the state legislature shall assign to an existing or to a new committee or subcommittee the responsibility to conduct oversight on the School of General Education, and on all further Schools of General Education that are established within the **{State Public University System}**.
15. No later than **{Month Day, Year}**, the **{Board of Trustees}**, and every two years thereafter, the **{governing board}** shall report to the **{new committee or subcommittee}** on progress made toward establishing the School of General Education consistent with the intent of this Act and factors affecting the long-term sustainability of the School.

SECTION B [General Education Requirements]

Students at the **{Selected State University}** may only receive a bachelor's degree if they complete a core curriculum of 42 semester credit hours, subject to the exceptions noted in Section (B)(6)(B) and Section (B)(8) of this act.

1. This core curriculum shall include the following 13 introductory survey courses:
 - A. A 3 semester credit hour course of Rhetoric and English Composition, which shall include grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and substantial readings from works devoted to rhetoric and composition by figures such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Hugh Blair, and aim to instruct students to produce correct and lucid academic writing.
 - B. A 3 semester credit hour Mathematics Required Course, which may only be Precalculus, Mathematical Logic, Probability, Introduction to Statistics, or Calculus I.
 - C. A 4 semester credit hour Laboratory Science Required Course, which may only be Introduction to Biology, Introduction to Chemistry, or Introduction to Physics.
 - D. A 3 semester credit hour course of Western History I 3000 B.C.-1450, which shall be a broad survey course with concentration on Athens and the Greek polis to 404 B.C., the Roman Republic and Empire, the rise of Christianity, Medieval Western Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and medieval English legal and constitutional history, including Magna Carta, common law, and Parliament.
 - E. A 3 semester credit hour course of Western History II 1450 to 2000, which shall be a broad survey course with concentration on the Renaissance, the Reformation, the development of parliamentary democracy in Britain, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution in Britain, Western science, and the rise and fall of the Soviet state and Nazi Germany in the twentieth century.

- F. A 3 semester credit hour course of United States History I 1607-1877, which shall be a broad survey course exploring the development of America's republican form of government from the colonial period through 1877, with particular attention to the Founding, as well as issues of politics, economics, technological progress, war, and foreign policy, and to include a comparison between the progress of democratic representation in the United States and the rest of the world.
- G. A 3 semester credit hour course of United States Government, which shall explore the founding principles of natural rights, liberty, equality, representative democracy, separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism, and constitutional self-government as they have played out over America's history, chiefly through the study of original source material, to include primarily substantial selections from documents published by Ohio's Ashbrook Center, including the contemporary documents that established and explained America's independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights, and later documents that illustrate America's constitutional history and structure.
- H. A 3 semester credit hour course of United States Literature I 1607-1914, which shall explore substantial selections from works of first-rank literary quality and enduring literary influence, often called Great Books, with readings that include religious literature, novels, short stories, poems, essays, and memoirs.
- I. A 3 semester credit hour course of Introduction to Economics, which shall include supply and demand, market competition, economic growth, trade, taxation, externalities, and public goods.
- J. A 3 semester credit hour course of one of the following courses:
 - a. Founding Ideas of Western Liberty, which shall explore influential conceptions of liberty written in the 17th through 19th centuries, with readings to include at least substantial selections from works by figures such as John Locke, Adam Smith, Montesquieu, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville on political liberty, religious liberty, economic liberty, common law, the nature of republican government, and the American fusion of liberty, republican government, civic virtue, and democracy;
 - b. Founding Traditions of Western Art, which shall explore the history of Western fine arts from ancient Greece to the twentieth century, with readings to include at least substantial selections from figures such as Aristotle, Alberti, Vasari, Winckelmann, and Ruskin, on music, painting, sculpture, and architecture; and shall expose students to the study of exemplary masterpieces of Western fine arts in genres including music, painting, sculpture, and architecture; or
 - c. Founding Ideas of Western Economics, which shall explore influential works of economic theory written in the 18th through 20th centuries, with readings to include at least substantial selections from works by figures such as Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Carl Menger, John Maynard Keynes, and Milton Friedman, on economy-wide phenomena such as markets, international trade, economic growth, inflation, the role of state fiscal and monetary policies, labor, and changes in unemployment.
- K. A 4 semester credit hour course of Western Humanities I 1000 B.C.-1450, which shall explore substantial selections from works of first-rank literary quality and enduring literary and philosophical influence, often called Great Books, with readings by figures such as Plato, Augustine, Dante, and the troubadours that include the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, Homeric epic, Greek philosophy, Greek tragedy, and medieval literature, and which includes a 1 semester credit hour component of English composition, which shall aim to instruct students to produce correct and lucid academic writing on the works taught in this course.

- L. A 4 semester credit hour course of Western Humanities II 1450-1950, which shall explore substantial selections from works of first-rank literary quality and enduring literary and philosophical influence, often called Great Books, with readings by figures such as Martin Luther, Teresa of Avila, William Shakespeare, Michel de Montaigne, Miguel de Cervantes, John Donne, and Jane Austen that include Catholic and Protestant religious literature, drama, essays, poetry, and novels, and approximately equal coverage of each of the five centuries between 1450 and 1950, and which includes a 1 semester credit hour component of English composition, which shall aim to instruct students to produce correct and lucid academic writing on the works taught in this course.
 - M. A 3 semester credit hour course of World Civilizations, which shall be a broad survey course covering the distinctive history, culture, literature, and social structure of at least four nations or culture areas to be selected from among China, India, the Islamic Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Russia, Japan, and Southeast Asia, with concentration on a representative country or countries permitted when a given culture area is under consideration.
2. General education courses in the humanities and social sciences, where appropriate, shall explore and highlight the theme of Western liberty and republican self-government, its historical sources, strengths and weaknesses, 20th century challenges from communism and fascism, contrasts with non-Western systems of government, its distinctive features in the United States, and its spread beyond the West.
 3. General education history survey courses, where appropriate, shall incorporate substantial selections from works of first-rank literary quality and enduring literary and philosophical influence, often called Great Books.
 4. No core curriculum course shall require, include, or award course grading or credit to, student work for, affiliation with, or service learning in association with, any organization engaged in lobbying for legislation at the local, state, or federal level, or in social or public policy advocacy.
 5. No core curriculum course shall require, include, or award course grading or credit to, lobbying for legislation at the local, state, or federal level, or any practicum, action project, or like activity involving social or public policy advocacy.
 6. The university shall offer both Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees.
 - A. More rigorous introductions to biology, chemistry, and physics may be devised to satisfy the Laboratory Science Required Courses requirement for students aiming for a Bachelor of Science.
 - B. Bachelor of Science degree holders may choose not to take these core curriculum courses: United States Literature I 1607 - 1914, Western Humanities II 1450 - 1950, Founding Ideas of Western Liberty, Founding Traditions of Western Art, and Founding Ideas of Western Economics.
 7. The core curriculum courses detailed in Section A, Subsection 7 shall be the only general education requirement for students at the **{Selected State University}** who wish to receive an associate degree.
 8. The core curriculum courses detailed in Section B shall be the only general education requirement for students at the **{Selected State University}** who wish to receive a bachelor's degree, except that **{the governing board}** may also require 3 to 6 semester credit hours of foreign language courses.
 9. The dean of the School of General Education, with the approval of the **{governing board}**, may allow students to satisfy core curriculum requirements with early college courses, including advanced placement courses, dual credit courses, and dual enrollment courses.
 10. Under the supervision, and with the approval of, its dean, the School of General Education shall

develop a set of learning outcomes consistent with the school's purpose and bylaws as defined by this act. The core curriculum courses detailed in Section B will be exempt from all administrative policies that affect course content, including learning outcomes, curricular themes, and areas of knowledge, except those developed by the School of General Education in conformity with the terms of this act.

SECTION C [Transfer Students]

The **{Board of Trustees}** shall direct the president of the **{Selected State University}**, and the other presidents of the colleges and universities of **{Public University System}** to enable transfer of students to the **{Selected State University}**, by:

1. offering regularly and sufficiently every core curriculum course described in Section B, Subsection 1;
2. identifying and encouraging the offering of courses at other **{Public University System}** or **{Community College System}** campuses that can be counted for transfer credit.
3. establishing all administrative means necessary to integrate student transfer to the **{Selected State University}** with the requirements of this act; and
4. providing that any student who transfers from any school to the **{Selected State University}** within seven academic years from the effective date of this act may fulfill their general education requirements in one of the three following ways:
 - a) by taking the program of general education specified in this act;
 - b) by taking the courses that satisfied general education requirements at the **{Selected State University}** immediately prior to passage of this act;
 - c) by any combination of the requirements referenced in Section C(4)(a) and C(4)(b) above that is approved by the Dean of the School of General Education.

SECTION D [Separability]

If any provision of this chapter, or the application of any provision to any person or circumstance, is held to be invalid, the remainder of this chapter and the application of its provisions to any other person or circumstance shall not be affected thereby.

REFERENCES

- Kurtz, S., Robinson, J., & Randall, D. (2023, November 12). *Model legislation: General Education Act*. The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal. <https://www.jamesmartin.center/2023/11/gea/>
- Belkin, D. (2023, March 31). Americans are losing faith in college education, WSJ-NORC poll finds. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americans-are-losing-faith-in-college-education-wsj-norc-poll-finds-3a836ce1>
- U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2024, February 12). *New study finds alarming lack of civic literacy among Americans*. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/civics/new-study-finds-alarming-lack-of-civic-literacy-among-americans>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Thomas Lindsay, Ph.D., is the Higher Education Policy Director for Next Generation Texas. He has more than two decades' experience in education management and instruction, including service as a dean, provost, and college president.

Lindsay was the director of the National Endowment for the Humanities' (NEH) signature initiative, *We the People*, which supports teaching and scholarship in American history and culture. He was later named deputy chairman and chief operating officer of the NEH.

Lindsay co-authored the American government college textbook *Investigating American Democracy* with Gary Glenn, published by Oxford University Press. He has published numerous articles on the subject of democratic education, many of which have appeared in the world's most prestigious academic journals, including the *American Political Science Review*, the *Journal of Politics*, and the *American Journal of Political Science*.

Lindsay has published articles on higher-education reform in *Real Clear Policy*, *Los Angeles Times*, *National Review*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *Washington Examiner*, *Knight-Ridder Syndicate*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Houston Chronicle*, *American Spectator*, *Forbes*, and the *Austin American-Statesman*, among others.

In recognition of his scholarship on democratic education, Lindsay was the 1992–93 Bradley Resident Scholar at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Lindsay earned a Ph.D. and an M.A. in political science and government from the University of Chicago and a B.A. *summa cum laude* in political science from Northern Illinois University.

Texas  *Public*
POLICY FOUNDATION

901 Congress Avenue | Austin, Texas 78701 | (512) 472-2700 | www.TexasPolicy.com