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Questions and answers about General Education at Andrews University

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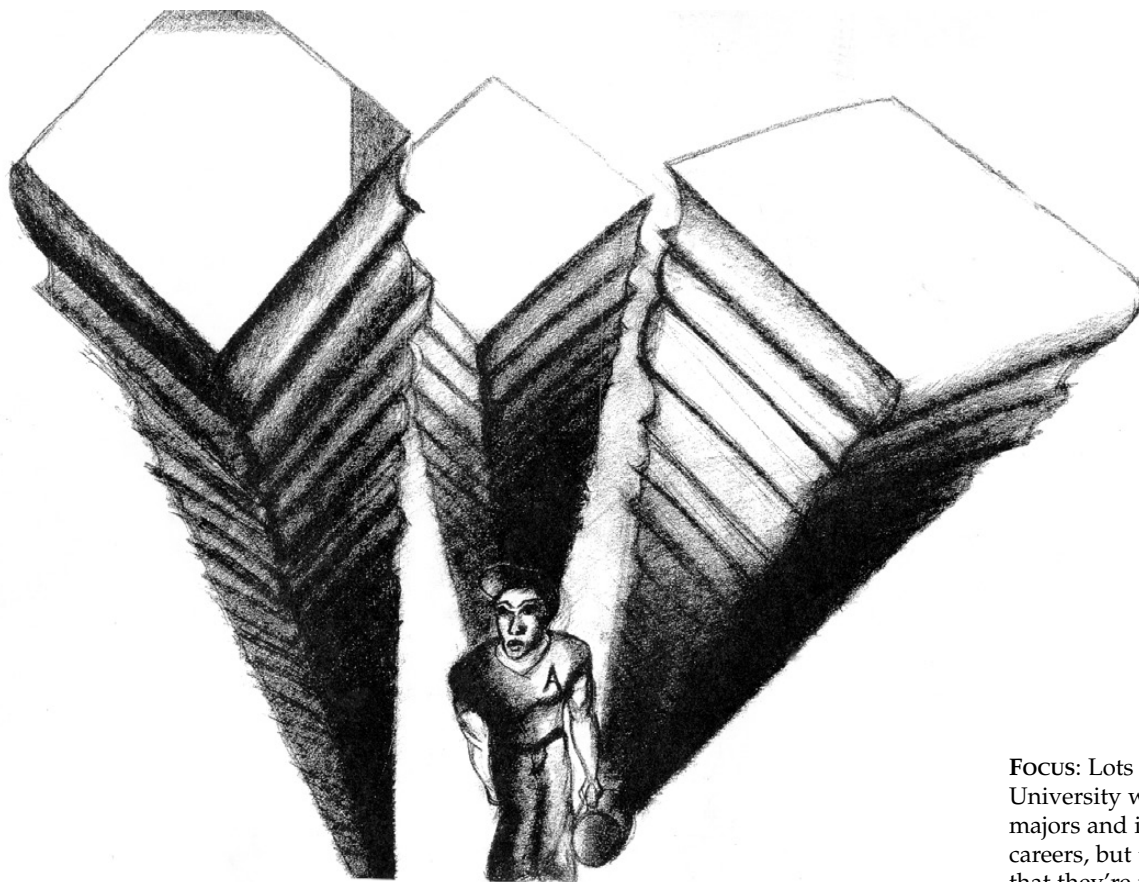
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Questions and answers about General Education at Andrews University



*An exclusive interview with Dr. Delmer Davis,
Director of General Education*

Focus: Lots of students come to Andrews University wanting to specialize in their majors and immediately prepare for their careers, but they are disappointed to learn that they're required to take "general" classes, especially during their first two years. Such would not be the case at European universities. Why do American universities and colleges require general education courses?

Davis: American educators of the 19th century wanted graduates to be well rounded citizens, regardless of vocational choice. The curriculum for most students included work in the humanities (particu-

larly rhetoric, logic and language study), mathematics, the emerging sciences and usually religion. Later in the century, influenced by German higher education, American colleges moved towards specialization at the graduate and undergraduate levels, but faculties continued to insist that a broad education should be linked with such specialization. Perhaps the American concern with providing the well-rounded approach is linked to the democratic ideal of an educated, mobile population built around equal educational opportunities for all people, resulting in the certainty of an intelligent citizenry working together for the best possible society.

FOCUS: But isn't it true that elementary and high school education provides students with enough general information so colleges should not continue to insist on such materials?

Davis: Well, it's certainly true that the elementary and secondary curriculum is typically a general approach to education with little chance for specialization, particularly in smaller schools such as Adventist academies. Even so, however, American higher education firmly believes that further general study is a necessity for college graduates. Our own regional accrediting association, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, as a General Institutional Requirement, specifies that all "undergraduate degree programs include a coherent general education requirement consistent with the institution's mission and designed to ensure breadth of knowledge and to promote intellectual inquiry."

FOCUS: The Andrews general education curriculum has recently undergone considerable revision. Why were such changes necessary?

Davis: Two major approaches to general education can be identified. The one with the longest history is called a "core" approach. In this approach, all students are required to take the same courses in general education, regardless of their majors. The other approach—the "cafeteria" model—allows students to choose many of their general education courses from lists of options in various discipline areas with each general area requiring a certain number of credits. By the late 60s, Andrews had adopted this approach. After nearly 30 years of the cafeteria model, faculty and administration became concerned over the lack of continuity in Andrews' general education from student to student. Choices had proliferated to the extent that one student's general education preparation might differ considerably from another student's

preparation. Such differences made it particularly difficult to assess how well the general education curriculum was succeeding.

FOCUS: What changes were made?

Davis: After several years of study by the members of the General Education Committee and the faculties of the undergraduate programs on campus, the faculty adopted a revised general education program (with implementation beginning in 1996) which cut down the number of choices considerably, moving from the "cafeteria" model to what might be best termed a "modified core" approach. The number of required courses was increased, while at the same time restricted choices were also retained in the various areas.

FOCUS: One of the changes in general ed was the inclusion of a required "service" component for all students as a way of attempting to fulfill the Andrews University Mission Statement emphasis on service. Besides the required service course and fieldwork, what other changes can you describe?

Davis: Other required courses newly created for the general education program include HLED 130 Essentials of Wellness, an integrated approach to health, fitness, diet and stress reduction; IDSC 211 Creativity and the Arts, an interdisciplinary course designed to introduce students to the creative process and creative problem-solving as revealed in the works of artists, musicians and writers; IDSC 321 and 322 Scientific Inquiry, an interdisciplinary course that combines biology, chemistry and physics for nonscience majors. Other new interdisciplinary "choice" courses were created in the social sciences and in religion.

FOCUS: How have the changes been received?

Davis: Whenever general education requirements are changed, there are bound to be students and faculty who prefer the old system to the new system. We are now in the fourth year of implementation of our modified core curriculum. Some students still object to not having more choices. Others feel that the new interdisciplinary courses are too difficult, while in contrast, some students think that they are too easy or that they are irrelevant. Faculty have modified the courses considerably in relationship to student concerns over the four years, making the courses more focused and better received by students.

FOCUS: What would you say is the biggest

challenge you now face with the present general education curriculum?

Davis: We have two challenges that we are attempting to meet. The first of these is to continue to make clear to students why general education is an important component of their total educational experience. In order to do this, we must be sure that the best teachers teach in the general education curriculum. Often it is the teachers rather than the content that make the difference in how students feel about general education. In the past, however, the tendency has been for the best teachers to emphasize "major" courses, while general education instruction received less attention.

Our second big challenge is our attempt to assess in a coherent manner the effectiveness of our general education program. We have recently changed our approach to evaluating the results of general education at Andrews by scheduling a rotating series of nationally-normed tests to be given to students in their graduation year. We are also hoping to use focus groups or a survey to provide yearly input on the "perceptions" of students regarding the various required courses and areas of general education so that we can continue to improve the program.

FOCUS: What's the future for general education at Andrews?

Davis: We'll continue to revise and strengthen the program. Of course, the program will always reflect our university's motto—*corpus, mens, spiritus*—general education at Andrews will always emphasize body, mind and spirit.

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Delmer Davis is a professor of English and director of general education at Andrews University. He has served as chair of the English department, dean of the graduate school and vice president of academic administration. Illustration by Mark Burrell, senior architecture major.