

**A Logical Diagnosis of General Education in Taiwan  
— Three Ad-Fallacies and A Prevailing Pharisaism**

通識教育的邏輯診斷  
——三個「訴諸」謬誤及法利賽主義

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## Abstract

The university takes pride in generating hard-earned knowledge through rigorous academic means. However, when it comes to the implementation of general education, we find that the university is happy to live without any well-established theory for the practice of it. In this paper, by outlining three logical fallacies, namely “ad populum” (appeal to people), “ad verecundiam” (appeal to authority), and “ad baculum” (appeal to force) associated with today’s general education in Taiwan, and a prevailing Pharisaism at nearly all universities around the world, I try to convey to the reader the urgent need of a solid academic research on the theory and practice of general education.

**Keywords:** ad baculum, ad populum, ad verecundiam, general education, Pharisaism

# A Logical Diagnosis of General Education in Taiwan —Three Ad-Fallacies and A Prevailing Pharisaism

## I. The Unbearable Heaviness of General Education

In the past decade, the Curricular Review of Harvard College has attracted great attention from college teachers, administrators and policymakers in the US and around the world. While Harvard bravely placed emphasis on general education in its new curriculum, we observed how much it took for a university to put through a strong general education program.

In 2002, a year after taking up his post as the 27<sup>th</sup> President of Harvard University, Lawrence Summers launched the first major review of the undergraduate curriculum of Harvard in thirty years. In 2004, a 67-page *Report on the Harvard College Curricular Review* containing 57 recommendations to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences made by a committee co-chaired by William C. Kirby, then Dean of the Faculty, and Benedict H. Gross, then Dean of Harvard College, was written up by Jeffrey Wolcowitz, then Associate Dean of the College, who oversaw the practical and day-to-day aspects of the curricular review.

The first recommendation of the report reads<sup>1</sup>

the Core Program be succeeded by a general education requirement that will enhance curricular choice, educate students in a set of areas that are defined broadly, include a wide range of courses, and provide for the development of a new set of integrative, foundational courses.

For those who reckon the importance of general education (hereafter GE), this move symbolizes the wake of GE in the twenty-first century, and everyone looks forward to the great impact that this reform could exert on higher education world-wide. Yet unexpectedly,

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<sup>1</sup> Harvard University. *A Report on the Harvard College Curricular Review*, Harvard's Office of the Curricular Review, 2004a, 13.

we then witnessed the sequential resignations of Associate Dean Wolcowitz, Dean Kirby, and President Summers in September 2004, January 2006, and February 2006 respectively, before the new program in GE was finally approved by the Faculty in May 2007. Merely a month after the approval, in June 2007, Dean Gross, the remaining key figure involved in the Curricular Review, joined them in announcing his resignation — more than two years before the new program finally came to effect in Fall 2009 for the class of 2013. One can certainly imagine that each of the four individuals stepped down for different reasons and that the fact their resignations overlapped with the launching of the new GE program was merely a coincidence. But it seems fair, at least, to suggest that GE is an unbearable heaviness in college education.

The underlying reason that GE needs to fight for its recognition is that (1) the rapid expansion of knowledge demands specialization, and the more specialized you are, the greater chance you will have in advancing knowledge, and (2) the better you are at advancing knowledge, the more likely you would get a tenure at a university. The combination of (1) and (2), which amounts roughly to “specialization → a successful career”, makes university professors praise specialization more than anything else, and as a result these professors become the greatest obstacle to GE.

Fortunately, when the pursuing of personal success through specialization does not add up to the common good of the society, the university begins to realize the importance of GE. In particular, in the twentieth century, two major revivals of GE came, not surprisingly, right after the two World Wars,<sup>2</sup> and in the wake of the twenty-first century, Harvard has initiated a new wave of revival of GE. In this paper, instead of praising Harvard and other universities that choose to reform and strengthen their GE programs for their great insight, I will be critical of their ways of implementing GE. With an eye on the peculiar phenomena related to GE in Taiwan, I claim that the GE today is at risk of involving three ad-fallacies and a prevailing Pharisaism. The main point that I want to stress is that it is the lack of a “theory of GE” that is responsible for all these unwelcome phenomena. The university takes pride in holding on to hard-earned knowledge acquired through rigorous academic means, and we should expect that it treats GE as an academic subject of study with the same high standard, so that the enterprise of GE can be free from any fallacy or Pharisaism.

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<sup>2</sup> In the US, there was another revival of GE that coincided with the end of the Vietnam War.

## II. Three Ad-Fallacies of General Education in Taiwan

The practice of GE without foundation poses a threat to the integrity of the university. While more and more universities nowadays introduce strong GE programs into their curriculums, the fact that a theory of GE, hence a common ground for GE, has been lacking from the very beginning is increasingly alarming.

In *General Education Today*, Jerry G. Gaff surveyed a wide variety of views and proposals on GE and grouped them into four distinctive philosophical approaches. Craig C. Howard subsequently gave them a thorough discussion.<sup>3</sup> These four approaches are, roughly in a chronological order,

- (1) The Idealist School founded by John Henry Newman
- (2) The Progressive School founded by Alfred North Whitehead and John Dewey
- (3) The Essential School of Robert Maynard Hutchins at Chicago University
- (4) The Pragmatism associated with Clark Kerr and David Riesman

Resorting to these four theories doesn't resolve the problem of the lacking of a common ground for GE. In fact it generates even more disagreements. It's not difficult to imagine what Newman would have said about Kerr's multiversity, or how Dewey would have tried to ease the anger of Hutchins. Basically, these four "theories" are four value systems, and their GE schemes are based on what they regard as most important for the students. For them, an approach to GE is "justified" if it agrees with their value systems, and should be criticized if it does not. Why one should take their value systems rather than that of the others is seldom, if ever, defended in these "theories".

As remarked by Clarence H. Faust,<sup>4</sup>

Almost every college in the country, if presidents, deans and catalogues are to be believed, provides a general or liberal education for its undergraduates; but it is impossible to discover any substantial, common element in the educational programs of our colleges.

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<sup>3</sup> Howard, Craig C.. *Theories of General Education: A Critical Approach*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Faust, Clarence H.. "The problem of general education." *The Idea and Practice of General Education, An Account of the College of the University of Chicago*. Eds. U. of Chicago Press & F. Champion Ward, 1992. 3-24.

Apparently, more research has to be done to find an argument that supports our GE actions. If GE is practiced without the support of a sound argument, or even based on an unsound argument, then the university is said to have committed a fallacy.

In the implementation of GE, the following three aspects need to be addressed: (1) the reason for GE, (2) the means of GE, and (3) the content of GE. Typical questions associated with these aspects are “Why do we need GE?” “How is GE to be executed?” and “What should our GE program consist of?” In the following subsections, I shall, based on the GE practices in Taiwan, discuss three ad-fallacies that are associated with the answering, or the ignoring, of these questions. The readers can see for themselves whether any of these fallacies have occurred in the practice of GE at their institutes.

## A. Ad populum

In 1996, a Constitutional Interpretation was made by the Grand Justices of Taiwan, declaring that the prescription by the Ministry of Education of a fixed set of commonly required courses<sup>5</sup> for all college students was in violation of the Constitution. Since then, the universities and colleges in Taiwan began to replace the common requirement that had been in practice for decades by various forms of GE program. Two years later, in 1998, the Ministry of Education commissioned the Chinese Association of General Education to visit every university and college in Taiwan to see how they went on with their GE programs. By the time Harvard began its curricular review in 2002, nearly all of the universities and colleges in Taiwan had already set up “Centers for General Education” for the handling of their GE programs. While a handful of these Centers are in the form of a committee supervising the GE program, most of them are substantial academic units consisting of faculty members whose primary responsibility is the teaching of “GE courses”.

As remarked earlier, before 1996 there was hardly any room for the universities in Taiwan to develop their own GE programs. And in 1996, when the credit hours of the common courses required by the Ministry of Education were released, many departments seized that great opportunity to increase the credit hours for departmental courses. Fortunately, the professors who later became affiliated with the Centers for GE have

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<sup>5</sup> Among such commonly required courses were Freshman English, Freshman Chinese, General History of China, and The Thoughts of Dr. Sun Yat-sen.

managed to secure a fair amount of credit hours in GE.<sup>6</sup> These GE-affiliated faculty members have subsequently developed into a community: they actively attend conferences on GE, apply for grants from the Ministry of Education for the teaching of a GE course and frequently interact with fellow GE teachers from other universities. Some university administrators even boast about the strength of their GE programs in terms of the number of credit hours in GE that they have required of every student and the number of full time faculty members they have employed in the Center for GE.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, in 2007, thirteen universities and colleges in Taiwan received major grants from the Ministry of Education to undergo a three-year project of GE-centered School-Wide Curricular Reform.

The overwhelming reception of the idea of GE by nearly all universities in Taiwan seems to be a good sign for the society as a whole. However, when we look at this phenomenon more closely, the following concern arises. Could this wave of emphasis on GE be merely the consequence of the effect of “Empire’s New Clothes” — All the other universities seem to have seen why GE is so important and have elaborated on it; how could we alone only stand and watch?

A typical fallacy of ad populum — appeal to the people — takes the following form

Everyone else does A,  
∴ We do A.

In the present case, if a university administrator merely justifies his or her deeds by resorting to the fact that every university in Taiwan, or even around the world, is doing so, then he or she has committed this fallacy.

So far as the “reason for GE” and the “content of GE” are concerned, the fallacy of ad populum is no cause for alarm, as by and large the reason for GE and the program of GE vary from university to university. Many university presidents and deans are even fond of elaborating on their ideas of GE and designing their own GE programs.

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<sup>6</sup> According to the *Report of the Evaluation of GE, phase III, part A*, released by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan in July 2008 (教育部：《大學通識教育評鑑先導計畫【第三期】A類計畫評鑑報告》，臺北：教育部顧問室，2008。)，a university in Taiwan typically requires its students to take 20~30 credit hours of GE courses, including language courses.

<sup>7</sup> Aletheia University once requires every student to take 52 credit hours of GE courses before they graduate, and has employed nearly fifty faculty members in its Center for GE.

However, when it comes to the “means of GE”, the fallacy of ad populum becomes evident. Nearly all universities in Taiwan follow the hardly challenged assumption that GE is to be achieved through “GE courses”, and most universities welcome the idea of launching a Center for GE (CGE, hereafter) and hiring full-time faculty members to teach these GE courses. These faculty members were called “GE teachers” in Taiwan. The Ministry of Education in Taiwan even provides grants for GE courses and awards for GE teachers. Nonetheless, so far as I can see, among the universities that have a staffed CGE, none has ever provided an argument for the following oversimplified division:

Academic Units	Departments	CGE’s
Courses	Departmental courses	GE courses
Faculty	Departmental professors	GE teachers

While most universities in Taiwan follow this division, I think there is a gap between “GE is important” and “there should be more GE courses and a well-staffed CGE”. As the latter clearly does not follow from the former, these universities simply appeal to the people to justify their deeds.

Now let’s look at the idea of GE courses more closely. To begin with, literally “general education” can be rephrased as a “for-all education”. But two senses of for-all need to be distinguished:

Sense-1 — the For-every-body Education: a theory of GE in this sense stresses the importance of something and insists that it should be required of every student. The four theories discussed by Howard are theories in this sense. There is little theoretical difficulty involved in the establishing of such a theory — something is very important and therefore it should be required of everyone, and that is it. The difficulty actually lies outside the theory — why is this something important? And it is surely very difficult for two parties with radically different value systems to reach an agreement as to what the most important thing is, especially in an era when everyone is allowed to have his or her own value system.

Sense-2 — the For-every-aspect Education (that is, the education of taking all relevant aspects into account): a theory in this sense does not start with the belief that something is important and hence should be required of all, rather it aims to provide reasons for people, possibly with diverse interests, to be general-minded. In other words, regardless of what he or she values most, he or she should consider all things relevant to the achievement of his or her goal. A theory in this sense has no obligation to persuade



others that something is important. Instead, it has the following challenge to meet: to promote generality without assuming any value system.

So far as courses fulfilling a Sense-2 GE requirement are concerned, it is useful to further distinguish two usages of the predicate “general”. On the one hand, when it is applied to a course, it amounts to the topics discussed in it being broadly spanned or the methodology adopted being general; while on the other hand, when it is applied to a set of courses, it amounts to the collection of courses forming a balanced diet for an individual.

Most universities in Taiwan offer their students GE courses that are general on their own right, i.e. the predicate “general” is applied to individual courses. This however, does not seem to be the right approach to generality for the following reasons:

(1) Presently the university hires specialists rather than general-minded individuals, and this makes it difficult to find qualified individuals to teach quality general courses;

(2) Even if such a course is available, given that time is limited and the course is broadly-spanned, the student inevitably learns only the superficial. Furthermore, with no hands-on experience with the subject, the course material can rarely be counted as “knowledge” for the student;

(3) What’s even worse is that, in the teaching of such general courses there is a great chance of oversimplification, or even misconception, of key notions, and when this does happen it would indeed be better off if the course has not been taught in the first place.

To summarize, asking students to take specially prepared “general”, if not superficial, courses which are both shallow and soft in nature to fulfill a GE requirement, not only does not solve the problem that GE is supposed to solve — namely, we often fail to recognize the significance, even the existence, of things outside our fields of concentration — but makes it even worse. After all, what we need is the recognition of the reality of others, rather than an over-simplified or even distorted image of others. Hence, setting up a CGE and recruiting GE teachers to offer overview GE courses should not be our primary concern. But sadly, most universities in Taiwan have fallen prey to the fallacy of ad populum and failed to conceive of other possible means of GE.

## **B. Ad verecundiam**

Nearly without exception, a university professor is hired because of her achievement in her field of specialization, rather than on her masterly command of a broad range of knowledge. In particular, the professors who take up higher administrative roles in a university are typically professors with exceptional achievement in their fields of specialization. And when it comes to the decision as to how a college curriculum should be set up and how much of it should be devoted to GE, these professors divide into two camps: professors against GE and professors for GE.

On the one hand, as the departmental professors are normally recruited based on their achievements in a specialized area of research alone, they inevitably share a common trait — they have, at some stages of their careers, sacrificed generality for specialty in order to get deeper results — and hence many of them do not see the need of GE at all. Some of them would even advise their students to “get your general education requirements out of the way as soon as possible, so that you can concentrate on the study of your departmental courses earlier.” These people are indeed right in claiming that for students to achieve something, they had better concentrate their energy on a specialized field of study. This is the fundamental problem that a workable theory of GE has to address and resolve.

On the other hand, there are those university presidents, deans and professors who appreciate the value of GE and make efforts to introduce strong GE programs into their universities. As a result, at some universities, faculty members constantly debate what percentage of credit hours in the curriculum should be devoted to GE to fulfill the GE requirement. In Taiwan, for the past decade, despite many departmental professors still sniffing at the GE requirement set by the university, the pro-GE deans are usually the winners, and many of them have received full authorization from the presidents to realize their ideas of GE.

That these academically well-achieved professors support the idea and practice of GE seems to be a welcoming fact. Nevertheless, it runs the risk of committing the fallacy of ad verecundiam — appeal to authority. As a word of warning, an ill-founded and ill-practiced strong GE program can do more harm than a negligible GE.

The expertise of a professor is gained through serious and rigorous studies of her research topic, and we respect her opinion because of her attitude towards research, her scientific ways of treating the topic and the solid conclusions that she has obtained

through academic means. However, when it comes to the topic of GE, not only do we forget to check whether the professors are experts on this topic or whether they are going to apply their rigorous methodology to the study of this topic; they themselves seem to also forget that they are in no position to make professional comments on GE. Being a great experimental particle physicist does not make you an expert of GE right away, nor does a Nobel Prize in physics increase your credential so far as making comments on GE is concerned. But in the real academic world, they do. When a world-renowned classics professor who used to complain about the fact that his students were required to take a physical science course to fulfill the GE requirement is appointed the dean of GE, responsible for figuring out how many credit hours of a school-wide curriculum should be distributed among various branches of sciences and what courses are deemed appropriate for the fulfillment of the GE requirement, it is likely that we will find him launching a GE program stronger than ever before. And, ironically, we trust his great insight into GE this time. In short, we have committed the fallacy of ad verecundiam in this aspect. This fallacy takes the following form

A is an expert,  
A says C,  
∴ C.

The above argument is fallacious in two levels. First, an expert is not infallible. Second, the expertise of the expert may not be in a field that is relevant to the statement C. In practice, ad verecundiam in the first level is less serious than that in the second level. In other words, if A is an expert on subject B, and A asserts C, where C is a statement within the realm of the subject B, then even though we are not a hundred percent sure that C is true, we can accept that C stands a good chance of being true. The fallacy in the second level, however, is often fatal: you trust someone who asserts something that is outside his or her field of expertise. In the case of GE, this is a particularly alarming fallacy.

When Harvard was preparing for its curricular review, Dean Kirby invited some faculty members to take part by putting their thoughts on GE into words. The resulting booklet *Essays on General Education in Harvard College*,<sup>8</sup> which contained the essays on GE by seventeen professors, was subsequently made available for people interested in the reform of GE at Harvard. It is an interesting fact to note that (1) none of the

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<sup>8</sup> Harvard University. *Essays on General Education in Harvard College*, Harvard's Office of the Curricular Review, 2004b.

professors' expertise is on GE, (2) the essays they wrote were unlike, both in style and in rigor, any of the academic essays they normally write on their subjects of study, and thus, unsurprisingly, (3) the collection of essays contain contradictory claims. Just consider the following two excerpts from the collection.

What was “general education?” It was the same as “liberal education”, and it referred above all to what should be common in our education. ---- Harvey C. Mansfield.<sup>9</sup>

A liberal education is what remains after you have forgotten the facts that were first learned while becoming educated. ... In this essay, I focus only on that portion of a liberal education that can be called “general education”, that is, the portion of an undergraduate's time in College spent outside a major or concentration but in some way constrained by some requirements. ---- Jorge I. Domínguez.<sup>10</sup>

So, what is general education? Is it liberal education itself? Or, is it only a portion of liberal education? If we cannot be sure of what our subject matter is from the very beginning, how are we to proceed further? Both of these two authors are Professors of Government, and they have these different ideas of GE. It can be expected that people from different disciplines would have even more diverse opinions, as we shall see later. For the time being, it is fair to say that there is an intrinsic difficulty in the practice of today's GE, namely that professors with no qualification in GE are responsible for the task of setting up a GE program for the students.

While the professors invited to join a GE committee are usually distinguished faculty members in their areas of specialization, and they know very well that their subjects of study need to be pursued academically (with all the hypotheses and derivations involved in reaching the conclusion spelled out), when it comes to saying something about GE, all they can say is something like “it is very important”, “I think students should...”, “We used to have courses...in the good old days” etc. — the idea that GE can be and should be made a subject as rigorous as their areas of study simply never crosses their minds. This amounts to an academic scandal for the universities and it can be very harmful to the students. The expertise of a professor on a subject does not grant him the right to say anything he likes about GE and to impose course requirements

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, in “A more demanding curriculum”, p1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, in “Liberal education at Harvard in this new century”, p1.

for students based on his unexamined personal preferences. At present, there are not many professors who specialize in GE, so it is unrealistic to ask every university to hire a professor in GE to help with their GE program. Yet there is one thing that we could and should do, that is, ask the professors who have already taken part in GE to see GE itself as a respectable, if not difficult, subject of study and to do research on it with the same level of rigor as they do with their own subjects of study.

By doing such research, we should be able to let our fellow professors know from the first principle why GE is important, without going through, again, a disastrous event such as the wars that preceded the major revivals of GE in the US in the last century. Furthermore, our fellow GE policy-makers would know that their expertise does not automatically extend to GE itself, and thus would not base their decisions on their unjustified insights, personal beliefs, or zeal, and will introduce a demanding GE program only when it is supported by well-grounded research.

The present paper is certainly not the place to discuss details of GE research. But I believe the researchers of GE should at least aim at addressing the following questions “What is general education?” “Why is it needed?” and “How is it to be done?” and I think, for a start, the CGEs that I have criticized in the previous subsection can be transformed into a research CGE, rather than remaining a teaching CGE, to promote serious research into the theory and practice of GE. Furthermore, in the future these centers can serve as a center for the education of professors, organizing workshops or offering degree courses for college deans or professors who have an interest in higher education.

### **C. Ad baculum**

As mentioned in the previous two subsections, when a university has not treated GE as an academic discipline, yet has decided to get on with it — without knowing what it actually is, why one needs it, or what the best way to conduct it is — the professors responsible for the designing of a GE program tend to follow what others are doing (committing *ad populum*), or follow their unjustified intuition, personal beliefs or zeal (committing *ad verecundiam*). But in practice, the situation can be worse than that — the fallacy *ad baculum* (appeal to force) is lurking around the corner to threaten the practice of GE as well.

In the past, we have seen some “visionary” presidents leading their universities to go through revolutionary GE reform from within. And in the past two decades, we have further witnessed that some “independent” accreditation or evaluation organizations have played some important roles to ensure from without that every university has a high quality GE program. Certainly, both the visionary presidents and the independent accreditation organizations are eager to promote GE, but I think they should still be under the supreme reign of academic research. If we receive forceful instructions, directions or criticisms from a president or an accreditation organization, demanding us to do things in their ways, and we, being afraid of them, just do as told, then we have committed the fallacy of *ad baculum*. This fallacy, in general, takes the following form

They will harm us if we do not do A,  
∴ We do A.

Certainly, no university president or accreditation organization would admit that they pose threats to faculty members this way. But, it goes without saying that they do have the power and means to exert influence on the faculty members so that they get hurt in some way. It is just that they would use phrases such as ‘I suggest that ...’, ‘We recommend that ...’ or ‘It’s advisable that ...’ rather than ‘Just do what I say, otherwise I will ....’ In any case, the key ingredient of a fallacy of *ad baculum* is already present.

In 2004, six years after the first national review of GE in Taiwan, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan proceeded with the evaluation of GE in seven leading research universities. In the report of that evaluation project, we find,<sup>11</sup>

The ministry of Education promises that in 3 years’ time, a re-evaluation of general education of the same scale will be conducted to the same universities, to check, on the one hand, how they have improved in the three-year period of time, and to make sure, on the other hand, that the pressure of a pre-scheduled re-evaluation will drive them to improve their GE as quickly as possible.

and

Based on the right and responsibility entrusted upon him, the Minister of Education will.....see the improvement of general education as a prime index for the approval of grants to these universities. Furthermore, when the Ministry

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<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Education, Taiwan. Report of GE Evaluation of Top Research Universities. (教育部：《研究型大學通識教育評鑑報告書》，臺北：教育部顧問室，2004。)

of Education distributes the general education related funds in higher education, the result of this evaluation would be heavily relied upon.

To see the effect of this threat, consider the case of National Taiwan University (NTU), the most prestigious university in Taiwan, which, with pride, did not pay much attention to the evaluation in 2004, so as to receive a C in ‘GE Organization & Administration’ and a C in ‘GE Teaching and Administrative Resources’. After the evaluation, notwithstanding the pressure of budget cut, NTU decided to do as told: replacing the original “Commission for General Education” with a “Center for General Education”, appointing three deans to be in charge of this Center and the two Sections of it — Section of General Education and Section of Liberal Education — respectively, and distributing a greater portion of grants it had received from the Ministry of Education to GE. Three years later, in 2007, the grades on the two C-items were improved from C to A and A+ respectively.<sup>12</sup>

As we have seen earlier, the establishment of a CGE needs to be researched and discussed, rather than to be demanded. One may even argue that GE is best overseen by a GE committee rather than a CGE consisting of teaching staff. Yet NTU submitted to the pressure and made the “improvement” unwillingly. The puzzling fact about the fallacy of ad baculum is that, it is indeed a logical fallacy, but if you dare to resist the force in question, then Woe to you, poor fellow! Nevertheless, in the rest of this paper, I shall still be concerned only with the truth about GE, rather than with any harm that may come with the pursuing of truth.

Concerning the evaluation of GE by an evaluation committee, we found that, in Taiwan, more often than not, the committee itself was not under any scrutiny. In 2003, the committee of eleven professors who were invited to do the evaluation of GE in Taiwan neither had a background in GE nor had done any serious research on GE. The only sure thing we can say is that these professors have some concern for GE. However a man with a blind zeal can do more harm than a man with no zeal at all. Why should these professors’ opinions be taken to be superior to ours so that we are required to improve our GE based on their suggestions?

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<sup>12</sup> Despite that, in the report of the 2007 evaluation, NTU was still “advised” to employ some full-time GE teaching staff in its CGE in the future. See Ministry of Education (2008) for details. It would be interesting to see whether NTU would do as suggested before the next GE evaluation comes about.

A nice illustration of this peculiar, yet general, phenomenon can be found in *Essays on General Education in Harvard College* as well,<sup>13</sup> where we find an interesting collection of essays virtually going in all directions. As Dean Kirby did not bother himself with the distinction between GE and liberal education in the introduction, the authors of the essays were happily helping themselves to a free interpretation of GE from their own perspectives. To name but few, we have

... It was not “breath” but a sense of what was truly important that provided the intellectual justification for general education... ---- Peter K. Bol.<sup>14</sup>

... we hope that they will exhibit, in their life after Harvard, the three significant qualities of an educated person: the desire to learn more; the desire to communicate to others what has been learned; and depth of emotional and moral responsiveness. ---- Helen Vendler.<sup>15</sup>

... [Liberal education] seeks to develop free human beings who know how to use their minds and are able to think for themselves. ---- Richard F. Thomas.<sup>16</sup>

I propose “Creating Knowledge” as the new rubric for General Education in the twenty-first century ... ---- Julie A. Buckler.<sup>17</sup>

All sound reasonable, yet evidently it is difficult for us to find a common ground for the discussions above about General Education. What is the core of GE? Is it general knowledge, certain personal qualities, critical thinking, or the ability to create knowledge? Or is it something else still? Peter K. Bol’s had a nice summary of views on GE in his essay “Another generation of general education”,<sup>18</sup>

Some say general education should provide students with the essential knowledge that every educated person should have...

Some hold that general education trains students in those skills – writing, oral expression, quantitative reasoning, logical argumentation, and careful reading...

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<sup>13</sup> Harvard University. *Essays on General Education in Harvard College*, Harvard's Office of the Curricular Review, 2004b.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, in “Another generation of general education”, p2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, in “On a Harvard education for the future”, p1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, in “General education and the fostering of free citizens”, p1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, in “Towards a new model of general education at Harvard College”, p1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, in “Another generation of general education”, p3.



Some hold that general education should introduce the great traditions of a civilization or a field within it ...

Some say that it should impart to students major ways of knowing, thus enabling them to acquire further knowledge for themselves...

Some see general education as offering students common intellectual experiences...

And some hold that general education should encourage intellectual curiosity and help students develop a profound sense of the rewarding of learning.

He then declared that for him (that would be view number 7!) the goal of GE is<sup>19</sup>

To provide us with occasions for thinking about the ways in which we are connected to the world around us.

It is difficult to see how these interpretations of GE are related to each other, and if someone can prove “the Fundamental Theorem of GE” — all these perspectives of GE are equivalent and amount to the same thing — then that would be the greatest breakthrough in GE to date.

Given that (1) no one has ever proved it; (2) those who come to a university to do the GE accreditation may hold any of the above views;<sup>20</sup> and (3) they are entrusted with power to punish the university through various means if the university dares to disagree with them, the fallacy of ad baculum is doomed to fall upon the university if the university could not hold on to a well-researched idea of GE.

### **III. A Prevailing Pharisaism**

The three fallacies mentioned in the last section all originate from the lack of a solid foundation for GE, and this reflects the general fact that the professors who are responsible for the practice of GE do not know much about GE themselves. And if we trace the career histories of these individuals, we will find that they were all very good at concentrating their energy on a specific topic, and many of them have “wasted” little

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, in “Another generation of general education”, p3.

<sup>20</sup> It is very likely that they do not have an agreement among themselves as to what an ideal GE should be like.

time on GE in their college years. In this regard, professors are more desperately in need of GE than students — if GE is of any good at all.

Nevertheless, we see things go the other way. On the one hand, we have seen departmental professors reluctant to allow their students to waste time taking courses fulfilling GE requirements, and, on the other hand, we have observed that the professors who organize the GE program seldom set foot into any classroom to audit the course. Referring to the Pharisees, Jesus says, “They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.”<sup>21</sup> In GE today we find a similar phenomenon — the ones that are desperately in need of general education turn out to be precisely the ones higher up in the hierarchy of the academic world and they are endowed with the power to decide what kinds of GE the students are to receive, and to what extent. However, if GE is really that essential, hence should be required of all undergraduate students, then why can the professors alone, as role models for the students, safely stay away from it?

In what follows, I will draw the reader’s attention to a particular phenomenon that vividly demonstrates the ironic fact of Pharisaism mentioned above. It is not unusual, in Taiwan, to see several professors jointly giving a GE course. This in effect tells the students that the general educational program that the university is proposing is an illusion — not even the faculty members of the university are truly generally educated so as to be able to teach the course all by himself or herself.<sup>22</sup> This, however, so far as I can see, is not too bad in itself.

Imagine that we have four active researchers in Classics, English literature, German literature and Chinese literature to jointly teach a general education course called Literature in Action, say, and all four of them do stay in the classroom throughout the whole term even when it is not his or her turn to give the lecture. I believe by doing so they have set the best example for the students showing that they themselves are as eager as the students to learn what the other professors have to say about the subject, and we have every good reason to look forward to a fruitful general educational course. Indeed, faculty members need, in order to be role models for students, keep on acquiring new general knowledge throughout their careers.

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<sup>21</sup> The Gospel of Matthew 23:4, in International Bible Society. *Holy Bible, New International Version*, Grand Rapid, Zondervan, 1978.

<sup>22</sup> I am not ignorant of the fact that there is some distance between “learned” and “qualified to teach”. But this at least tells us that the learned-but-yet-qualified-to-teach individuals can still learn something from the truly qualified ones.

Unfortunately, in reality, it is simply not the case. At most universities that I have known in Taiwan, if four professors co-teach a two-credit-hour course, then they should share the 2 credit hours, i.e. each receiving only one half credit hour for the course. As a result, more often than not, a co-teacher would come to the class only when it is his or her turn to give the lecture, and pays no attention or shows no interest to what the others have on offer at other times. Now, the irony: if the professors themselves think that the other parts of the course are not important, or are irrelevant to them, why then should the students alone be required to go through the whole course? These professors in effect spit at the enterprise of GE in front of the students.

To cure such Pharisaism, how about requiring that whenever a committee of professors proposes a GE program, the professors themselves should be subject to the same program requirements — they must either be willing to fulfill all the requirements of the program, or demonstrate that they already possess the equivalence of the knowledge required? This is clearly a bold proposal that I suspect no university dare carry it out. But if the professors and mentors of undergraduates really are knowledge-lovers as they claim to be, then shouldn't they feel shameful of themselves demanding their students to know this and that, while they themselves know little of them. I take their unwillingness to be involved in the teaching or learning of a course fulfilling the GE requirement to be a sure sign that the GE program designed by them is doomed to failure.

I believe that the prevailing Pharisaism and the three fallacies mentioned earlier can be avoided only when an academically well-researched amoral ground for the GE has been established and is whole-heartedly appreciated by the professors. I shall end this paper with the following remark on the amorality of GE.

Evidently, for each of the four schools of GE summarized by Gaff, a peculiar value scheme has been assumed without mentioning it. The principal concerns of them are as follows: for the idealist, an unspecified ideal; for the progressive school, the advance of knowledge in the future; for the essentialist, the western civilization in the past; and for the pragmatist, the multiple functioning of a present day university.<sup>23</sup> It is worthwhile to note that the principal value in concern — which varies from one school to another — is precisely the value of a human being. Yet we, as human beings, are unlikely to agree on what characteristics an ideal human being should exhibit, and what features of a human

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<sup>23</sup> While each of the four schools have different value schemes, they can all achieve their goal by resorting to “generality” — by paying respects to all virtues, all possible futures, all the good old times, and all varieties of goals, respectively.

being are to be regarded as more important than the others. Therefore, the students' choice of what to value and their intention to get it should be exempt from any criticism. It is their way of getting what they want that is subject to criticism. If they are shortsighted rather than general-minded, then more than often they will not achieve their goal in the end — doing something that seemingly leads to the achievement of one's goal often leads to the opposite. If someone does something  $p$ , thinking of getting his desired  $q$ , while in fact  $p$  does not lead to  $q$ , then he is to be blamed for “stupidity” (an amoral judgment) rather than for “selfishness” (a moral judgment).

A theory of GE should serve precisely as a vehicle to help us come to such a realization, and, hopefully, through the design and execution of an excellent GE program such a concern for generality can be successfully conveyed to the student.

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## 摘要

大學引以為傲的是：它能透過嚴格的學術方法獲致紮實的知識。然而，在通識教育的施行過程中，我們發現大多數的通識措施並沒有任何理論根據。藉由指出與當前的通識教育牽扯不清的三個明顯謬誤：訴諸群眾、訴諸權威、訴諸武力，以及各大學普遍瀰漫的法利賽主義，我嘗試傳遞以下呼籲：通識教育的理論與施行亟需我們投入更多嚴謹的學術研究。

**關鍵字：**訴諸權威、訴諸群眾、訴諸暴力、通識教育、法利賽主義