UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM | THE JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Tackling Complex Problems to Teach Inquiry and Civic Engagement in General Education: Character Education as a University-wide Initiative

Jessica Green

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 14th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 8th – Saturday 10th January 2026.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

Tackling Complex Problems to Teach Inquiry and Civic Engagement in General Education: Character Education as a University-wide Initiative

Jessica Green
Brigham Young University

Ask any university student about General Education, the classes they are required to take to graduate, and it wouldn't be unusual to hear a litany of complaints. General Education classes involve a lot of work, don't necessarily relate to a student's field of study, and can be seen as roadblocks toward timely graduation. These negative views of the classes meant to shape well-rounded students aren't new. *The Journal of Higher Education* published this critique in 1934: "the [university] curriculum is a mass of inherited rubbish, the accumulated debris of three or four hundred years of hit-or-miss instruction, a petrified anatomical structure which solidified centuries ago" (Eels 188). Many students today feel that required General Education courses have become ossified into an educational system that they want to be more dynamic.

The value of a liberal education has become a topic of debate throughout society at large. The Association of American Colleges & Universities defines liberal education as "A course of study designed to prepare students for complexity, diversity and change. Best accomplished through the alignment of both broad or general education and a major or specialization, a liberal education helps students develop broad knowledge of science, cultures, history, and society" (5). Yet for students, the very classes that differentiate a bachelor's degree from a technical certification are the ones that they struggle to find purpose in. Brian Vander Schee remarks that students

> do not see the relevance of such [General Education] courses and sometimes contribute minimal effort to understanding the material and making connections to other fields of study, including their own academic major. This can be manifested in the general education classroom with superficial dialogue, distracting behaviors, and even poor attendance. (382)

Some of the responsibility for the poor reception of General Education classes is certainly on students, but institutions also need to own some of this failure. Higher education doesn't always do a great job of helping students see the value of being broadly educated. One of the best critiques of General Education comes from Carol Geary Schneider, former president of the Association of American Colleges & Universities:

> General education programs too often underperform. When general education is organized mainly as an à la carte menu of disconnected survey courses, and when it is taught in huge lectures that emphasize content delivery over critical inquiry while neglecting students' own active participation in their learning, it falls short of its intended horizon-expanding purposes. Instead of developing big-picture understanding of the wider world through a purposeful immersion in the liberal arts and sciences, students too often find that their broad or general learning is fragmented, incoherent, and frustrating. (Association of American College and Universities v)

Schneider's point that General Education is often both fragmented and frustrating to students may stem from the fact that students don't connect what they are learning in

class to the professionals and citizens they want to become. To better help our students understand the purpose of their broad education, we need to link General Education to character and virtue education and help them see how their education can promote flourishing on both the individual and societal level. In my role as Assistant Director of General Education, I have been working on an initiative that will prepare faculty to teach General Education courses in a way that will invite students to both engage in critical inquiry and enhance their character education.

Brigham Young University is a large, privately-funded, predominantly four-year institution whose mission and aims are strongly tied to its sponsoring religious organization, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One of the benefits of staying so closely aligned with our religious sponsor is that our students share a common language of virtue literacy based on their religious upbringing and education. Most of our students have studied virtues such as compassion, humility, and integrity through weekly Sunday school and high school religious education classes. When they first encounter the official motto of Brigham Young University, "Enter to learn; go forth to serve," BYU students tend to embrace the ideal that their education should benefit more than just themselves.

One unique characteristic of our students, recruited from across the United States and world, is that about two thirds of BYU students between the ages of 18 and 21 serve an 18- to 24-month full-time mission where they are asked to set aside their own educational or career pursuits and serve others ("Answering the Call"). This contributes to the fact that more than 60% of BYU students speak a second language and that students generally take an interest in community service ("Facts & Figures"). In the 2024-2025 school year, BYU students provided over 55,000 hours of service through our campus service organization (BYU Center for Service & Learning 11).

BYU students also commit to live by an Honor Code, the purpose of which is "to develop disciples of Jesus Christ who are leaders in their homes, the Church, and their communities." As part of that Honor Code, students "maintain the highest standards in their personal conduct regarding honor, integrity, morality, and consideration of others" (Church Educational System Honor Code). In the Aims of a BYU Education, a foundation document for our institution, the element of civic service is even more emphasized: "BYU seeks to develop students of faith, intellect, and character who have the skills and the desire to continue learning and to serve others throughout their lives." This echoes closely the introduction of the Jubilee Centre Framework, which states that "Schools should and do aid pupils in learning to know the good, love the good, and do the good."

Because of these unique conditions, both faculty and administrators at BYU have long sought to incorporate character education into both academic classes and extracurricular activities. Two of the four aims of a BYU education are "character building" and "leading to lifelong learning and service" ("Aims of a BYU Education"). While much of the implementation of these aims is left to departments and individual faculty members, our administration does provide reminders to align curriculum with the university's mission at annual university conferences and occasional all-faculty meetings. So while our students and faculty do tend to share some virtue language and mission-level buy-in for character education, it would take a more centralized approach to ensure that each student has a chance "to develop a commitment to serving others, which is an essential

manifestation of good character in action" (Jubilee Centre Framework 5). One way to prioritize all students having the opportunity to practice the skills of being an involved, active citizen is to design these experiences into the General Education program.

BYU's General Education program includes introductory courses in the arts, letters, and sciences; skills-based courses such as writing and quantitative reasoning; and courses on American history and government as well as a global and cultural awareness requirement. Our program is a broadly distributed General Education program, meaning that for each of the thirteen requirements, there can be dozens of classes that fulfill a single requirement. For example, because of the great variety of languages spoken by students at BYU, our General Education language requirement has over 200 classes that students can take to fulfill it. While this helps students use classes they want to take to contribute to their graduation, it does make it harder to ensure that all students have common experiences, including the opportunity to develop the character necessary to serve in their communities.

The prospect of a new General Education program at BYU has given us the opportunity to consider what virtues and characteristics we want students to have upon graduation. When we were evaluating different frameworks that might structure a new program, one of the approaches we found was inquiry-based learning. Inquiry-guided or inquiry-based learning "refers to an array of classroom practices that promote student learning through guided, and increasingly, independent investigation of complex questions and problems, often for which there is no single answer" (Lee 9). A central critique of our current distributed General Education program is that many General Education classes concentrate on providing an introduction to a discipline as a service to majors, rather than concentrating on what a broadly-educated student needs to know and practice to engage with the world. Using inquiry-guided pedagogy is one way to turn the focus to helping students understand how different disciplines examine and find solutions to problems.

Moving away from the vision of General Education classes as survey-style courses that provide some familiarity with the seminal documents of a field and a basic utility with the discipline's vocabulary can be hard for practitioners who appreciate the breadth of a traditional curriculum. But moving away from a content coverage model to a model focused on inquiry can open the door for student curiosity:

> Rather than seeing the teacher's role as that of delivering a preformulated, centrally organized curriculum of 'basic knowledge and skills,' and testing to ensure that this content has been acquired, we endeavour to plan overarching themes that, while congruent with the mandated curricular topics, open up possibilities for students to select their own 'objects' for inquiry and to take responsibility for determining how to proceed. At the same time, individual investigations are also embedded within a collaborative framework of joint activity and the dialogue of knowledge building within the community as a whole. (Wells 201)

Focusing on inquiry doesn't mean that you throw out the foundations of teaching your discipline. It means that you carefully plan to uncover curriculum as part of your students' investigation into what it means to construct knowledge in your field. By approaching fields of knowledge and learning through inquiry, students also gain a clearer understanding of the intellectual, moral, and civic virtues that each discipline relies on.

In our pilot courses using inquiry approaches, we asked faculty to focus on teaching students who are not planning on majoring in their field to help them avoid teaching an introductory biology, literature, or geography class. By divorcing General Education requirements from major requirements often set by accrediting bodies, faculty can focus on questions and concerns central to a true liberal education. We ask faculty to list the most important skills a student of their discipline must acquire and then to consider what a student could do to begin understanding their discipline in a single-semester class. We also ask them to identify essential questions, those questions that their discipline is qualified to help students answer through prolonged investigation. Jay McTighe provides a helpful framework for considering a variety of questions in different settings. For example, in a nutrition class, students might look at a cascade of interrelated questions throughout their semester:

Questions that hook: Can what you eat help prevent zits?
Questions that lead: What types of foods are in the food groups?
Questions that guide: What is a balanced diet?
Essential question: What should we eat? (McTighe 13)

Questions that hook, lead, or guide are all useful; however, essential questions are those that lend themselves to extended study and research and for which there are many different answers. Jason Baehr in his book *Deep in Thought: A Practical Guide for Teaching Intellectual Virtues*, relates that as he worked to allow more autonomy in his classroom, he "began to see how, in spelling everything out for my students, I was robbing them of important educational opportunities, including opportunities to wonder, puzzle about, and wrestle with important ideas" (74). This sense of wonder and time to wrestle with questions is something that commonly gets lost in the rush to cover enough content.

While initially faculty members might lead by asking their students probing questions, throughout the semester of study, students are encouraged to develop their own interest in a facet of the topic addressed. In this model of learning, faculty members act less as a sage on the stage and more like a guide by the side. "Students focus on answering compelling questions, or getting a better understanding of the questions they have raised. Instructors support this process, acting as resource people and animators, and introducing intellectual and academic skills as they are needed" (Justice et al. 843). Inquiry-driven classrooms offer a far different view of General Education classes than traditional survey courses; they are places to engage in the work of exploring questions where faculty provide theoretical frameworks and knowledge as students need it for their investigations.

Tackling essential questions as part of a General Education course offers faculty the opportunity to showcase the best of their discipline's thinking when it comes to a specific, real-world problem. And it gives students the chance to connect the theories and methods they have been studying to something happening in the world or even in their community right now. Unlike study abroad programs or other experiential learning activities limited to select students, incorporating study of real-world problems into the formal curriculum of General Education affords each student the chance to see exactly how their education might positively impact their community. No matter their current focus of study or future plans, a General Education that focuses on inquiry and societal issues will "enable pupils

to explore their role as active citizens within their school, the community, and globally" (Jubilee Centre Framework 15, emphasis removed).

Because the very nature of a General Education class is that students will not have a high level of disciplinary expertise, sometimes faculty wonder what types of real-world problems students, particularly new students, can handle. Here are a few examples of essential questions addressed and the disciplinary skills that students gained in General Education classes taught in the last year:

> Example 1: How can we sustainably and ethically feed all of humankind? This class topic was taught by a chemistry professor who trained her students in scientific principles and reasoning through an examination of how food is produced and prepared for consumption.
>
> Example 2: What is a nation, and what does it mean to feel belonging in a national community? This class topic was taught by a humanities professor who asked students to reflect on ethical issues such as law, war, migration, and refugees through analysis of the literature and culture of different countries.
>
> Example 3: What are the root causes of poverty, and how can I help those who struggle to meet their basic needs? This class topic was taught by a sociology professor who asked students to explore the complexities of poverty through multiple social lenses as a way to refine analytic ability.

While these courses still cover introductory concepts and theories of a discipline, they are no longer introductions to the discipline because they are focused on helping students see more clearly a problem that the discipline can better help them understand and better equip them to do something about. For an introductory science course, you might expect to see the following learning outcome: Demonstrate an understanding of the basic scientific principles which undergird the scientific process. This is still one of the learning outcomes for the class in Example 1. But this inquiry-driven class takes the students' scientific reasoning a step further. An additional learning outcome points explicitly to the reason students need to gain this reasoning ability: Evaluate scientific data and claims in order to make rational decisions on public-policy science issues that affect their community. By pushing both the faculty and students to showcase how to apply the information that students are learning to a real-world problem, the focus is transformed from knowledge acquisition to application, analysis, and evaluation.

In a traditional humanities General Education course, it would be typical to ask students to be able to place literature or art into its historical, political, or cultural context. Inquiry-based learning asks that students be reflective learners, to articulate how the principles of literary analysis they are learning apply to the problems different countries are facing now. By making students more proximate to these sometimes sweeping and distant problems, it "encourage[s] pupils to make a commitment to purposeful voluntary activity in and out of school" (Jubilee Centre Framework 15, emphasis removed).

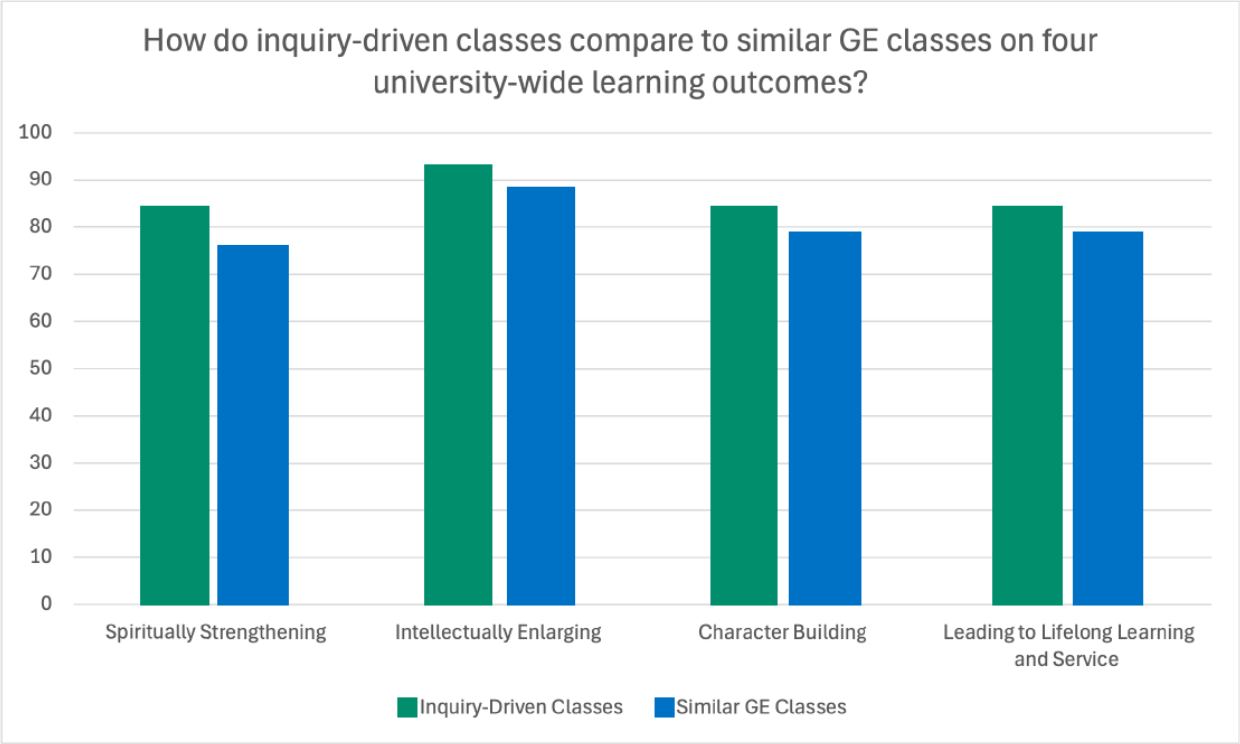
Social science classes frequently address real-world problems and issues. Yet as I interviewed students taking an inquiry-driven sociology General Education course, what I noticed was that students had been given the opportunity to apply what they were learning to propose solutions that took the community's values and needs into account. Students had been given the chance to practice moral and civic virtues like compassion, integrity, justice, and community awareness as they worked to understand what sociology can do to improve the lives of both individuals and communities.

One of the best qualities of our students is their excitement to address even the most difficult societal issues. But sometimes their zeal to help can be tempered by their lack of understanding about what is really at the root of the problem. Henry David Thoreau said, "There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root." The antidote to this branch-hacking could be supplied by a broad liberal education, through an understanding of what different disciplines can offer to these pernicious, complex problems. In a speech on the occasion of BYU's centennial, Spencer Kimball offered this take on Thoreau's metaphor: "We should deal statistically and spiritually with root problems, root issues, and root causes… We seek to do so, not in arrogance or pride but in the spirit of service." The idea that cross-disciplinary higher education will give students an edge in their ability to find solutions to so-called wicked problems is at the heart of what a General Education focused on moral and civic virtues should provide. Perry Glanzer addressed the multi-disciplinarity of this type of problem-solving in the context of General Education:

> In reality, learning about the moral discussion we have had throughout history regarding what it means to be a good citizen, a good family member, a good neighbor, a good steward of resources, a good friend, and so forth, involves all of the disciplines. Yet, we know that challenges to human flourishing are not simply sociological, historical, or psychological. Usually, it helps to draw upon these academic tools or perspectives but understanding what it takes to achieve various forms of human excellence requires all of them. (191)

Rather than relegating the investigation of social ills only to the most advanced undergraduate or graduate students, General Education should seek to engage students with these problems from the start of their university education. In addition to the foundational knowledge they need to understand a little bit about the world through the lenses of chemistry, humanities, or sociology, these classes empower students to see what steps they might take to, for example, create more food security, more fairness, and more flourishing.

Though we are still waiting for final approval on a new General Education program, we have had some positive assessment of our pilot courses using inquiry-driven learning to address real-world problems. When comparing our inquiry-driven classes to similar traditional General Education classes, we found that students rated inquiry-driven classes as higher in both "character building" and "leading to lifelong learning and service."



Source: BYU Office of General Education, fall 2024 GE classes.
Inquiry-driven classes, n = 350 students
Similar GE classes, n = 3,798

Students in our fall 2025 classes reported a variety of positive feedback from inquiry-driven classes:

- "It covered genuinely interesting topics and taught a lot more than other GE's."
- "She gives good examples of real-life applications."
- "I love [faculty name]'s focus on serving others and her enthusiasm in her teaching."
- "The greatest part about this class has been how applicable it is to daily life."
- "I like how the course is very real world applicable and we can see these issues in our everyday lives."
- "They are things we can put into practice in our life to be better people and better disciples to see others around us, society, and the world differently."
- "I loved how engaging it was and how I was able to think about the world in a new light!"
- "It centered around issues very relevant to the world that we are going to inherit, such as climate change, vaccines, and evolutionary theory."

Negative feedback was more scattered. Occasionally students felt that there was too much discussion in class or that the topics were too open-ended.

We asked students to tell us about what skills they had gained from their inquiry-driven class. One student explained, "I feel like I've learned a lot about asking questions…I've definitely seen growth…not being afraid to be confused and go seek further knowledge and seek further understanding of concepts and stuff through your own

research, but also through mentors." Another student responded, "Because it is super project-based, as I'm sitting in the class, I'm actually learning rather than just memorizing the content for an exam." We also asked students what the benefit of taking General Education classes was. One student responded, "I'm grateful for it. I won't be a science major, but I can see that taking those introductory courses to different various topics has helped me feel like I'm getting a better sense of understanding the world."

Ultimately, giving all students the opportunity to practice virtuous engagement in their community through real-world problems helps to create habits of mind. Jason Baehr relates that, "Your intellectual character—which again is one dimension of personal character—consists of your dispositions to act, think, and feel in the context of epistemic activities and pursuits, such as learning, thinking, inquiring, observing, reasoning, wondering, and analyzing. It reflects who you are as a thinker and learner" (30). Allowing students the space to wrestle with their own intellectual character and societal issues through the lenses of multiple disciplines helps them see themselves as engaged professionals, neighbors, and community members. Incorporating virtue and character education into an inquiry-driven approach in General Education classes promotes the ideal that the purpose of higher education is to produce citizens with both the skills and desire to serve others.

Works Cited

"Aims of a BYU Education." Brigham Young University website, https://aims.byu.edu/aims-of-a-byu-education.

"Answering the Call." *Y Magazine*. Winter 2017, https://magazine.byu.edu/article/answering-the-call/

Association of American Colleges & Universities. "General Education Maps and Markers: Designing Meaningful Pathways to Student Achievement." 2015. https://dgmg81phhvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Publications/PDFs/E-GMSGE.pdf

Baehr, Jason. *Deep in Thought: A Practical Guide to Teaching for Intellectual Virtues*. Harvard Education Press, 2021.

BYU Center for Service & Learning. "Y-Serve 2024-5 Annual Report." https://yserve.byu.edu/annual-reports

"Church Educational System Honor Code." 30 Aug. 2023. https://policy.byu.edu/view/church-educational-system-honor-code

Eels, Walter Crosby. "Criticisms of Higher Education." *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1934, pp. 187-89.

"Fact & Figures." Brigham Young University website, https://www.byu.edu/facts-figures

Glanzer, Perry. "General Education Sucks: So Teach the Great Identities." *The Journal of General Education*, vol. 69, No. 3-4, 2020, pp. 179-95.

"The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools." Third Edition. University of Birmingham. https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/character-education-/the-jubilee-centre-framework-for-character-education-in-schools/

Justice, Christopher et al. "Inquiry-based Learning in Higher Education: Administrators' Perspectives on Integrating Inquiry Pedagogy into the Curriculum." *Higher Education*, vol. 2, no. 58, 2009, pp. 841-55.

Kimball, Spencer. "The Second Century of Brigham Young University." *BYU Devotional*, 10 October 1975, Provo, UT. https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/spencer-w-kimball/second-century-brigham-young-university/

Lee, Virginia. *Teaching & Learning through Inquiry: A Guidebook for Institutions & Instructors*. Stylus Publishing, 2004.

McTighe, Jay. *Essential Questions: Opening Doors to Student Understanding*. ASCD, 2013.

Vander Schee, Brian A. "Changing General Education Perceptions through *Perspectives* and the Interdisciplinary First-Year Seminar." *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, Vol, 23, No. 3, 2011, pp. 382-87.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm

Wells, Gordon. "Inquiry as an Orientation for Learning, Teaching and Teacher Education." *Learning for Life in the 21st Century: Sociocultural Perspectives on the Future of Education*. Blackwell Publishing, 2002.