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Introduction

The Story of General Education

In the process of doing research for this book, I chatted with colleagues and friends about its subject matter. When I said I was writing about General Education, I received a variety of responses. These ranged from "Gen Ed—you mean like those classes I had to take when I started college?" to "General Education . . . yeah, I don't know very much about that," to "What's Gen Ed?" One of my former deans, an economist by training, insisted that she had never heard the term "general education" used at either of her previous institutions, where Gen Ed had been labeled as "liberal education" and "distribution requirements," respectively. She further objected to the term itself, proclaiming "'general' sounds like *nothing*."

None of these reactions were surprising to me. Unless a faculty member has worked in admissions, undergraduate studies, or with staff who regularly interact with students and the public, they are unlikely to know much about Gen Ed's content, and certainly not its nomenclature, or history. This is especially true for faculty in disciplines not included in the Gen Ed curriculum (for example, engineering, nursing, business) or who teach only upper-division undergraduate or graduate students and who thus may have never really thought about Gen Ed at all. Such sedimented ignorance of Gen Ed's principles over generations can also be true for faculty in the liberal arts since, as

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a rule, academics are most knowledgeable about what they themselves teach and study, and less so about what others do, by comparison.

As for the public, Gen Ed is just one of many obstacles in higher education as a whole that slows progress to the valuable college degree. Many in the public who value a college degree but are unhappy about its costs, or the time it takes to complete, hope Gen Ed will just move out of the way to make way for truly important things—like specialized major coursework and other professional training that directly relates to preparation for a specific career. Other members of the general public eschew college and higher education altogether. Each of these people, who are hardworking members of American society—our neighbors, family members, and coworkers—have no good reasons at present to care about whether Gen Ed persists, is revived, or is reinvigorated, especially given its framing over the last thirty-odd years as a sum-total negative. To much of the public, Gen Ed was created to get more of their tuition dollars and to make their children repeat work that they already did in high school. Gen Ed is a box of jacks spread out on the floor that players hope to gather up in one bounce of the ball—at most two—so that they can win the game of higher education. Gen Ed is, with apologies to Shakespeare, sound and fury, signifying nothing.

With all the above viewpoints in mind, the goal of this book is to get you, the reader, to change your mind about General Education. Whether you are a student, faculty member, administrator, parent, or policymaker, or none of the above, I want to persuade you that General Education—or the set of core, introductory courses across academic subjects that are required for a four-year college degree—is more valuable than you think. By exploring the rhetorical histories and futures of Gen Ed—that is, the way it is spoken and written about, promoted, and also, minimized—I am asking you to see the story of Gen Ed as intrinsic to and indivisible from the story of modern higher education in the United States. In telling this multilayered story, I make key stops along the way to examine discourse on Gen Ed within academic communities, local histories of schooling, national testing movements, and higher education policy implications on the students Gen Ed was meant to serve, in order to illustrate how Gen Ed has devolved in both its purpose and execution since its origins some eighty years ago.

No system, educational or otherwise, is perfect. General Education, in its many forms and permutations, is only as strong as the faculty, administrators, and policymakers who articulate and implement its teachings on their campuses, and the students who take Gen Ed courses and choose (or not) to use the lessons learned in their educational and professional lives. In telling

Gen Ed's story, I provide both historical and contemporary evidence to support my claims about Gen Ed's value and its precarity, some of which may be painful to read, especially if what you learn about the enterprise of schooling in the United States is either new or long since forgotten. As much as we tout education as a fundamental tenet of our democracy, this book will teach you that there are still clear educational winners and losers when it comes to getting a college degree, depending upon how (or whether) that degree was completed, and under what circumstances.

I start this story in 1945, with Gen Ed's initial articulations as both a program and a social movement, which represented deeply held, principled views of how to live and work in a participatory democracy, including the belief in the edification that college can bring. This story ends just about eighty years later, with the widespread rhetorical reconstruction of Gen Ed that sharply contrasts with its postwar origins, backed by many citizens' beliefs that a four-year degree is a financial burden, an elitist pursuit, and worst of all, a waste of time (and money). This tale of Gen Ed—which I tell from my perspective as a first-generation humanities faculty member who is deeply invested in undergraduate education and the benefits college can provide especially to the marginalized and disadvantaged among us—will show you how many Americans have gone from valuing higher education to shunning it, out of fear, confusion, and a blind (and often uninformed) worship of both school and workplace efficiencies.

If you are still willing to hear my good reasons for how our wrongheaded thinking about higher education is 100 percent dependent on the vilification of General Education, please read on. I'll focus the remainder of this introduction on some fundamental facts about Gen Ed; a brief history of its origins at Harvard; what I mean by the "rhetoric" of Gen Ed, in practice; the realities of Gen Ed courses and credits on the ground, including in my own field of rhetoric and writing studies; and finally, a brief overview of what the rest of the chapters of this book will discuss and how they might be useful to you and to making Gen Ed better in the future.

So, please settle in to hear this important tale. We have a lot of ground to cover together.

The Fundamentals of General Education in Perilous Educational Times

Let's begin with some contextual definitions and foundations and other key information for readers less well-versed in General Education as a curriculum or a concept. Such readers have good reasons not to know much, as Gen Ed's

recent (i.e., twenty- to thirty-year) history has been one of marginalization and obfuscation both on and off college campuses. Gen Ed in the twenty-first century operates thusly: You, the student, take a menu of Gen Ed courses in usually your first and second years of college, courses designed for those with no prior knowledge in the subject at hand and aimed at a cross-sectional audience hoping to gain a broad background and shared understanding of the parameters and importance of a particular field or discipline(s). These courses may be small or large in size, in person or virtual, taught by faculty or graduate students, and in total, equal anywhere from thirty to sixty credits of your four-year bachelor's degree (or the majority of your two-year associate's degree). This is the case, however, *only if* you didn't place out of some or all of these Gen Ed courses in high school, via Advanced Placement (AP), College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or ACT or SAT requisite subscores (for the English and math sections), *or* dual enrollment / dual credit programs, where you gained credit for *both* high school and college courses *at the same time*.

If you did end up taking a full menu of General Education courses, you are in the distinct minority in the United States. That's because many students—especially white students from privileged backgrounds—come to college with double-digit credits of Gen Ed already (most frequently in English and in other humanities, such as history, followed by mathematics and the social sciences), while others were able to earn an entire associate's degree (or 60 credits of a 120-credit bachelor's degree) while still *in* high school, by taking advantage of one or more of the various credit options noted above.

This galvanizing construction of Gen Ed as a curriculum that happens off a college campus (or in the cases of distance or virtual learning, outside a college classroom) is reliant upon the key belief that college can be a waste of time and money, akin to remedial education as a whole, and that Gen Ed is simply a menu of check-box courses that only exist as an expensive, repetitive hurdle to earning that degree. For example, a May 2024 report from the Pew Research Center found that "about half of Americans say that a college degree is less important today than it was 20 years ago." Such views are skewed along political party lines, with 57 percent of Republicans and 43 percent of Democrats holding these beliefs, and those without a college education also agreeing with this assertion more than those without a college education (30% and 22%, respectively). And 38 percent of those with a bachelor's degree—less than half, but certainly a nontrivial number—assert that their four-year degree was "not too or not at all useful" in their ability to obtain a "well-paying job" (Fry et al.).

Similarly, a survey reported on by the Gates Foundation in March 2024 revealed that both high schoolers and "non-enrollees" (those not in a degree program and also not currently in high school) felt that the most important reason to get a college degree was "to be able to make more money" (71% of non-enrollees, 81% of high schoolers). They also believed that on-the-job training was more valuable than a four-year college degree, with 77 percent of non-enrollees reporting job training as an "excellent/good value" versus only 57 percent reporting the same for a college degree. And finally, 38 percent of high schoolers and 33 percent of non-enrollees agreed that having more dual enrollment courses in high school was "extremely helpful" in completing a college degree.[1] And a 2022 report of an online survey of 1,006 students and 605 parents by the College Board—which also administers both the AP and CLEP programs—notes that "80% of all US high school students and parents believe there is value in a college education" but also indicates that only 32 percent see college as primarily a "valuable investment," versus 66 percent believing college is primarily important to "get the job I want after high school." Importantly, only 27 percent of students surveyed believe that the primary reason to attend college is because it will "expose me to many different types of people and perspectives." Notably, Black adults are more likely than Latinx or White adults to see college as much or somewhat *more* valuable than before the COVID-19 pandemic (37% versus 26% and 22%, respectively).[2]

Such views about the relative value of college, particularly those cast in economic terms, are the reality across large segments of American culture, which now has a US president at the helm also determined to devalue education even further by rolling back payment forgiveness on student loans, eliminating the US Department of Education, and targeting his own presidential rhetorics toward working-class citizens, some of whom he had led to believe would benefit socioeconomically from his anti-intellectual, anti-education platform.[3] More important than any one leader's current views, however, is how the growing disregard for higher education is also antithetical to General Education's original design: as an equalizing measure for *all* students, and a site for discovering intellectual ideas and opportunities that a student may not have otherwise known even existed, which in turn helps them to not just secure a "good" job but also better function in a democracy—which, at least for the moment, is still what the United States wants to be.

In this book, I historicize these original benefits of General Education and contrast them with the prevailing rhetorics that now control it—namely those of efficiency, economy, and remediation. From my particular viewpoint as a

scholar of rhetoric and writing studies, this book also takes as its central premise that introductory college writing courses are *the* foundational experiences within General Education programs. Such a premise leans on the fundamental, even dogged, belief among the public that literacy is the key to advancement and success in our economy—even as many within that public repeatedly diminish and marginalize literacy pedagogies. The histories of General Education and literacy education are thus forever intertwined, as both rhetorically complex and as prone to the political whims and fleeting trends that characterize our equally complex views of literacy and democracy in the United States.

It is my further contention that first-year writing courses, as part of General Education, have suffered the most among all core Gen Ed subjects, as the result of shifting institutional, public, and even corporate rhetorics of the latter half of the twentieth century regarding what Gen Ed is, or could be. On occasion, this suffering has been at the hands of those who design and operate writing programs and who lack a full understanding of their role in enacting the principles of General Education. In making this assertion, I do not discount that a mathematician could write their own book, parallel to this one, about the fate of mathematics as a core requirement in the history of Gen Ed—nor do I think such a book is unwarranted, given the contemporary frenzied (over)emphasis on STEM education and concomitant calls for better and more extended K–12 preparation in math (and the physical and natural sciences, and computer science), especially for minority and also first-generation students.[4]

Yet literacy instruction, in contrast to other subjects, continues to be framed as corrective rather than additive or knowledge-gaining. Despite constant industry calls for college graduates to be "good communicators," the instruction designed to make these postgraduate identities possible is still seen by the general public as a fix-up, clean-up shop. In contrast, instruction in mathematics is understood to be the *building* of technical knowledge of increasing, scaffolded complexity (i.e., from college algebra to calculus III) in the service of STEM careers requiring mastery of such concepts as a baseline for hire. This identity admittedly elides the more complex, theoretical side of mathematics as much as the public conception of literacy and writing instruction ignores the broader pursuits of the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies itself. And certainly, the debate over the place of basic (i.e., "pre-college" level) math in college curricula rages on. Yet as a public, we do not talk about writing instruction in the same ways that we do instruction in other subjects, partially because writing itself is seen as subjectless, and because "poor" writing skills are often associated with lower social class.[5]

This book therefore also focuses on the postwar history of General Education as it affects the position of first-year writing instruction, and argues that each has been victim to misconceptions of what a socioeconomically minded liberal education can and cannot provide for a democracy, especially one now in the throes of late-stage capitalism. But you, the reader, need not be an expert in either rhetoric and writing studies or any other field to follow this story, because you likely have already heard some of the public declarations about higher education that I amplify in this book. For example, in 2003, Harvard University President Derek Bok declared that "a university must have a clear sense of the values needed to pursue its goals with a high degree of quality and integrity. When the values become blurred and begin to lose their hold, the urge to make money quickly spreads throughout the institution" (*Universities* 6). Yet such a declaration was undercut some twenty years later by the Thiel Foundation, backed by PayPal founder and venture-capitalist billionaire Peter Thiel, in its promises of "$100,000 to young people who want to build new things instead of sitting in a classroom."[6] How do stakeholders in higher education decide which of these rhetorics is the "right" one to follow when they both sound equally compelling in our fraught financial times?

Value alliances that form between corporate giants and the US government, and against academic leaders with investment in college as a greater good, certainly can portend a dangerous future for higher education as a whole. But as I show, such alliances become near-perfect rhetorical frameworks for devaluing General Education as nonspecific to a major, introductory in its typical approaches, and offering instruction in areas that students may never study again (for example, biology for an English major, literature for a computer science major), never mind the cross-applicability of such experiences to actual life and career practices. General Education's history is laden with the damages incurred from the uptake of these circulated values (though our current political arena evinces an anti-intellectualism not seen in any other postwar US presidential administrations to date). Its history is also jeopardized by our collective public conceptions about writing, literacy, and social uplift, which become reflected in the critical courses that make up the Gen Ed curriculum, as well as whom these courses do and do not ultimately serve.

In order to understand how we got to this place, let me first summarize the rhetorical and pragmatic origins of General Education as born at Harvard University. With an acknowledgment that programming in General Education existed before and during the time of Harvard's initiative (including at Columbia University, the University of Chicago, the University of Iowa, and the

University of Minnesota, among others), I submit that it is the Harvard model that is most evident in our current conceptions of Gen Ed, and that Harvard's is the most high-profile origin story as well, in terms of its architects and ensuing publications lauding and promoting its work.

General Education at Harvard: Postwar Education as Liberation

In his February 25, 1938, speech "The Mission of American Universities," then president of Harvard University James Bryant Conant declared that "At least half of higher education is a matter of selecting, sorting, and classifying students."[7] This mantra stands as one of the earliest declarations of higher education's potential to provide, on the one hand, social uplift and class ascension and on the other, to preemptively disenfranchise students, especially those from nondominant populations. Conant's subsequent leadership of Harvard's 1945 vaunted publication *General Education in a Free Society* (Harvard Committee), colloquially known as the "Redbook," provided a very public preamble to his later executive roles with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the College Board, including the now-ubiquitous Advanced Placement program. Each of these roles allowed Conant a wide platform for shaping how the "regular" student—who is neither a family legacy nor of gifted or talented status—could succeed in higher education and, subsequently, in American life.

By Conant's design, Harvard's General Education initiative was originally crafted to help ameliorate the effects of inherent sorting mechanisms in academe, at least to a degree, by presenting Gen Ed as a baseline set of core subjects that all students should study in their college years, regardless of their preparation or future professional aspirations. Informed by enrollment shifts at Harvard and other elite institutions following World War II, as well as their economic impact on institutional operations and the demographics of graduating classes, Conant's plan served as a widely accepted blueprint for other institutions nationwide for the Gen Ed menu of core required, usually introductory courses in the arts, humanities, mathematics, physical and natural sciences, and social sciences.[8] The Harvard plan also influenced how secondary schools would organize their curricula, notably including the expansion of programs designed to address students' overall health and hygiene, such as physical education. Though the University of Chicago memorialized its own in *The Idea and Practice of General Education* (1950), it is Harvard's plan that remains the most commonly referenced template for how modern General Education curricula

have been imagined and implemented as core areas of study for the first two years of a student's college education.[9]

General Education in a Free Society was the result of work by the University Committee on the Objectives of General Education in a Free Society, which began work in 1943 and ended with the Redbook's publication in 1945. The committee was made up of twelve Harvard faculty from Arts and Sciences and also Education and drew upon reams of research and consultation both inside and outside Harvard's gates. This publication and its aims have been the subject of scores of studies in higher education since then, alongside copious scholarship on Conant himself; indeed, in Wilson Smith and Thomas Bender's substantial compendium *American Higher Education Transformed 1940–2005*, an excerpt and summary of the Redbook is the lead artifact.[10]

The committee members were Paul H. Buck (chairman), John H. Finley Jr. (vice-chair), Raphael Demos, Leigh Hoadley, Byron S. Hollingshead, Wilbur K. Jordan, Ivor A. Richards (more commonly known to rhetoricians as I. A. Richards), Phillip J. Rulon, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Robert Ulich, George Wald, and Benjamin F. Wright. These faculty—all white men, and all tenured—represented the disciplines of history, classics, philosophy, biology, education, English and rhetoric, biology and chemistry, and political science. Complementing these was Conant's own training as a chemist. These men largely attended elite high schools or boarding schools as children, and elite universities for their undergraduate and graduate education. Hence the three pages of acknowledgments that lists seventy-five external men and women consultants—from companies such as International Harvester and Pratt and Whitney, numerous public and private high schools, many private and public colleges and universities, labor unions, and state boards of education, as well as thirty-five other Harvard faculty (including Theodore Morrison, Director of English "A," aka first-year writing), and, finally, the three secretaries who "prepared the manuscript for publication." A description of the committee's collective process is in the book's introduction, in the form of a letter of transmittal to Conant:

> We maintained a central office in which memoranda poured and where daily groups smaller than the whole committee met informally to discuss our problems. We sought advice from both our colleagues in the university and from persons of various walks of life and sections of the country. We brought consultants to Cambridge as individuals and in groups. We operated through subcommittees and by conferences. All in all, we tapped so far as was in our power the rich and varied thinking and experiences of American education. (Harvard Committee xiv)

Such a process may sound familiar to readers who themselves have been on councils or boards of undergraduate education at their college or university, or on committees to revise their own institution's General Education requirements. But where Harvard's work differs from the typical curricular revisions we undertake today is its massive scope and national aim to change the conversation about and processes for educating American citizens. This work was intensive and complex, undertaken by faculty who were both invested in the task and also inexperienced in much of what the final report would ask colleges and their faculty to do in the classroom and in the community with the new population of postwar students. The labors of the committee may be found across several linear feet of documents in the Harvard University Archives.[11]

In this same letter of transmittal that opens the Redbook, the committee repeats the value statement that would characterize the overall committee charge, sent forth to them by Conant on January 11, 1943: "The primary concern of American education today is not the development of the appreciation of the 'good life' in young gentlemen born to the purple. It is the infusion of the liberal and humane tradition into our entire educational system. Our purpose is to cultivate in the largest possible number of our future citizens an appreciation of both the responsibilities and the benefits which come to them because they are Americans and are free" (Harvard Committee xv). Taking this directive, the group constructed a philosophically and civically minded 267-page plan divided into the following sections: "Education in the United States"; "Theory of General Education" (including chapters titled "General and Special Education" and "The Good Man and the Citizen"); "Problems of Diversity";[12] "Areas of General Education: The Secondary Schools"; "General Education in Harvard College"; and "General Education in the Community."

As noted in the first section of the Redbook, a core consideration of the committee was to search for "some overall logic, some strong, not easily broken frame within which both college and school may fulfill their at once diversifying and uniting tasks. This logic must be wide enough to embrace the actual richness and variegation of modern life—a richness partly, if not wholly, reflected in the complexity of our present educational system. It also must be strong enough to give direction to this system—something much less clear at present" (40). Indeed, the Redbook was designed to be a broad proclamation against the primacy of "special education," or that which was meant for professional or advanced study. The committee envisioned General Education as a tool for strengthening our democracy and collective civic responsibilities and

addressing, if not eliminating, the decidedly diverse social and educational needs of postwar American youth.[13]

Despite its aim to provide equalizing educational programming, the committee did *not* see General Education as a nominal vessel housing generic course requirements, as it so often functions today. In particular, the committee did not intend for General Education to mean

> some airy education in knowledge in general (if there be such knowledge), nor does it mean education for all in the sense of universal education. It is used to indicate that part of a student's whole education which looks first of all to his life as a responsible human being and citizen; while the term, special education, indicates that part which looks to the student's competence in some occupation. . . . Clearly, general education has somewhat the meaning of liberal education, except that, by applying to high school as well as to college, it envisages immensely greater numbers of students and thus escapes the invidium which, rightly or wrongly, attaches to liberal education in the minds of some people. But if one clings to the root meaning of liberal as that which befits or helps to make free men, then general and liberal education have identical goals. (Harvard Committee 51–52)

This imperative was both intellectual and pragmatic in its design, for Harvard (like many other elite colleges postwar) now found itself educating a new group of citizens, significantly as a result of the GI Bill (which directed government funds to institutions as well as students) and the slow stream of women entering Harvard from Radcliffe College during wartime to occupy seats vacated by enlisted men. To stay financially solvent, and socially current with the times, General Education was a necessary instructional plan that would soon become adapted across the country, for similar reasons.

With this brief overview above, I want to emphasize to readers unfamiliar with Harvard's work just how much the Redbook influenced higher education to see General Education as a requisite set of courses providing intellectual gain for all who take them, in a college setting. This belief stands in sharp contrast to the rhetoric of General Education today, which divides academics and the public regarding its true educational value, rapidly devolving in perceived purpose to something only for students who *lack* proper K–12 educational training and coursework. Further still, the Redbook had no mention of, or even thoughts toward, the current characterization of General Education as a curricular enterprise that is nonspecific and thus interchangeable across all institutional types and educational levels. Instead, it made explicit connections between high school and college but avoided declaring that a student might

only engage in Gen Ed within the secondary school setting. Instead, it upheld the evolutionary view of college as the start of a lifelong pursuit of engaged citizenry—to use today's terms, a "K–16" endeavor—but not the kind based on efficiency principles that now elide levels of personal and intellectual development toward avoiding so-called instructional redundancies. Nothing about General Education, to its Harvard founders, was aligned with redundancy; rather, it was based on recursive *reinforcement* across levels, and adoption of principles key to democracy.

Conant's later (1953) book *Education and Liberty* narrated such a process, arguing that by the mid-twentieth century, college

> came to be more and more justified as preparation for citizenship. It was more and more divorced from any connection with professional training which was the province of a university: law, medicine, theology, and gradually the sciences with the exception of engineering came to be regarded as postgraduate subjects. The logical outcome of this development was a continuous demand for a wide variety of new subjects to be taught in school as well as college. The drive for general education—"education for citizenship"—affected the high schools even more than the colleges. . . . In less than fifty years the pattern of full-time schooling . . . was completely altered. (47)

As Conant further argues, "If you combine a belief in equality with a belief in the desirability of a full-time education leading to the collegiate degree for all who can afford it, the American pattern of education is the logical outcome" (46).

For Conant, the "average" student could only succeed through possession of core knowledge of all the means of intellectual inquiry present in the university's curriculum; such was his protest reaction against postsecondary emphases on specialization and narrow training that presumed a different kind of student than was entering US colleges mid-century. Indeed, Conant observed that "experimenting with various types of college courses" across the General Education framework was a way to address the shift from an entirely elite, "highly literate" student body to the postwar college population that also included returning soldiers and lower- and middle-class students lacking the benefit of college-educated parents helping them with their studies. As Conant asserted, "the cultural background of the students is too diverse, the impact of modern science and scholarship has been far too great. These two factors have made necessary a re-examination of the older idea of a liberal education" (*Education and Liberty* 52).

Today, the competing forces that drive Gen Ed in and out of view—as an educational *movement* born of a postwar ideal regarding social class rarely

realized on a wide scale—have wreaked havoc on its original equalizing and liberating purposes and its wide use value and applicability to all students. And Conant's point about all students who can "afford" college has been massively complicated by the rising price of a college degree, secondary to severe cuts in funding to state universities and the high price of student loans in relation to the salaries for college graduates in many fields. The continuing value and position of General Education in its current incarnation in the twenty-first century, when set against Harvard's original plans and Conant's core ideals, is thus put to the test by asking two key questions: Is it a movement designed to provide tools for enculturation, assimilation, and uplift, or for civic engagement, liberation, and social action? And is it delivering on one or both of these promises, or neither?

General Education Today: Rhetorics Bought and Sold on the Educational Marketplace

In the chapters to follow, I tell the story of the rhetoric and, to borrow from James Berlin, the *reality*, of General Education from the mid-1940s to the present day, so as to interrogate how the "selling" of Gen Ed has waxed, waned, and been colonized by various actors who are associated with, or who can benefit from, the enterprise of higher education. But what do I mean by the "rhetorics" of General Education, exactly?

I use *rhetoric* in its simplest term throughout this book: that which uses the available means of persuasion, performed by any number of actors (rhetors) in order to influence one or more audiences. In presenting these rhetorics, some readers might see me performing what John Schilb would call my own "rhetoric of refusal," since, as a faculty member and also a school administrator with many years of experience in General Education instruction, I am expressing and enacting a "particular disassociation: that between a procedure their audience expects them to follow and a presumably better course" (*Rhetorical Refusals* 35). Further still, my fellow academic readers will likely see my work here as seeking "the audience's assent to another principle, cast as a higher priority" in relation to General Education (3). In other words, this book does not do what is "rhetorically normal" in discussing Gen Ed—that is, propose particular reconstructions of curricula that better fit societal and institutional priorities, as valuable as those efforts are. Nor do I, as this book's author, tow what many in the Gen Ed industry would consider the party line. In this book, I am focused on how we *speak, write, and argue about* General Education. Because

no amount of Gen Ed reform in the world will work unless we first change these modes of discourse.

That Gen Ed industry, as I construct it throughout this book, is made up of testing companies, state legislatures, other local politicians, and even some university administrators themselves, who form a collective *anti*-literacy sponsorship, to borrow from scholar Deborah Brandt's well-known concept. I say this because these stakeholders have become invested in using rhetorics that diminish and sideline General Education away from college campuses, to the extent that these actors benefit far more from its absence than its presence in completion metrics, selectivity, and curricular configurations that also may allow streamlined entry into graduate programs for highly qualified students. Indeed, Gen Ed is a curriculum that almost *everyone*, not just students, seeks to get out of the way, by any means necessary.

But this did not happen overnight; it took many decades of chipping away at the original promises of the Redbook for us to get to where we are now. Some questions I'll ask about the rhetorics surrounding Gen Ed are as follows: How have public responses to Gen Ed curricular content and requirements (both positive and negative) affected writing's place in American universities? What role have local and state politics played in these decisions, including those related to race and educational attainment? What impact have credit-by-exemption programs and concepts such as seamless transfer had on the quality and import of Gen Ed programming, including the universality of the first-year writing course? And finally, what populations have benefited from Gen Ed as a movement, including within first-year writing, and which have been left behind?

Indeed, General Education is a hot topic in higher education, even as faculty in individual disciplines tend to look inward at adjustments and amendments to their own curricula, rarely discussing or understanding how those curricula fit into larger educational systems that all college students experience. The literature on General Education as a concept thus circulates most widely amongst scholars and researchers who study and assess teaching and learning per se, including those who undertake theoretical examinations of the evolving structures of colleges and universities. Part of the problem with promoting General Education is understanding what is meant by the term "general"—a term prone to rhetorical miscasting as well, as it hails an identity that is nonspecific, generic, or devoid of meaning altogether, as noted at the start of this introduction. The frequently substituted term of "liberal education" can be equally problematic—in that some citizens believe a liberal education

(or the liberal arts, even) is equal to left-wing politics, when in fact its roots are quite fundamentally democratic (even conservative by some measures). On my campus, the term for Gen Ed is "core curriculum," which emphasizes its centrality. Other institutions use terms such as "foundations," "first-and second-year studies," or other similarly broad labels. To borrow from a common saying, Gen Ed, like the Devil, goes by many names.

National organizations have attempted to create a common understanding of Gen Ed across these local nomenclatures and permutations, some emphasizing liberal education as the most ideal, and capacious, framework within which to house Gen Ed. The American Association of Colleges and Universities, for example—more commonly referred to as the AAC&U and a leader in "advancing the democratic purposes of education," per its website—has published various treatises on liberal education as part of its core organizational mission. On an extensive page within its site, entitled "What Is Liberal Education?," the AAC&U defines it as "an approach to undergraduate education that promotes integration of learning across the curriculum and co-curriculum, and between academic and experiential learning, in order to develop specific learning outcomes that are essential for work, citizenship, and life." This AAC&U definition is in harmony with the Harvard group's defining goals, minus the "outcomes" language not yet part of the professional lexicon in 1945.

The AAC&U further notes that the key components of liberal education come in four parts. These are (1) "Essential Learning Outcomes"; (2) "High-Impact Practices" (e.g., capstone courses, portfolios, first-year experience courses); (3) "Signature Work" (a student immersing themselves in an original project); and (4) "Authentic Assessment" (rubrics that align with the AAC&U's VALUE initiative).[14] The essential learning outcomes are framed by four specific areas: knowledge of human cultures and the physical and material world; intellectual and practical skills; personal and social responsibility, including civic knowledge and engagement; and integrative and applied learning (AAC&U, "Trending Topic").

The first of these four aspects—framed in this paradigm using the heading of "Essential Learning Outcomes"—are what we would consider the foundational components of the original General Education movement still offered at most postsecondary institutions, and areas also often invoked in institutional General Education program outcomes.[15] In the immediate postwar era, of course, assessment was still a nascent concept, and terms of art such as "high-impact practices" were not in academia's vocabulary. But the interconnectedness of foundational coursework across the areas outlined above, with

further, deeper investigations of problems across the curriculum was very much a principle that early Gen Ed proponents encouraged.

What clouds the mission of Gen Ed in the twenty-first century is the splintering of the first of the four areas of knowledge away from the other higher-order, specialized work that comes chronologically after it (in most cases, with the exception of first-year experience); this splintering is anathema to scholars such as Chris Gallagher, who has argued for a more integrated four-year curriculum. Many colleges and universities value—even vociferously promote—these "signature" aspects of a college degree to prospective students. The idea of "hands-on learning" within a college curriculum is a big selling point in recruitment, as it promises to provide an experience that adds value—implicitly *practical* value—to a college degree. Yet these same colleges may simultaneously enable, if not encourage, students to bring in AP or other test-based credits in order to bypass the fundamental Gen Ed subject areas noted above—which are seen by the public as divisible and interchangeable by design.

Given these conditions, though "liberal" and "general" become synonymous in discussions of General Education both past and present, the execution of educational experiences labeled by these two terms may be very different in practice. As Terrel L. Rhodes (2010) has also observed, General Education committees working on reform and reinvention of the curriculum today face "more restrictive definitions" that omit "much of the earlier intent to form character and judgment in students through an intentional intellectual and social development process grounded in experiences requiring practical application of knowledge" (244).

As a result, outside the genre of scholarship discussed above that directly addresses core values within General Education and how to reform curricular structures so as to make these values visible to all, research in higher education that encompasses General Education more broadly pivots toward the changing requirements of college and their relationship to student mobility, particularly in terms of initial college requirements (often but not always framed as barriers) that may be exempted or waived. It also engages sometimes with doomsday rhetorics about the end of the liberal arts, though not as tied to Gen Ed histories in any consistent way. This approach is reflected in books such as Moner et al.'s *Redesigning Liberal Education* and Davidson's *The New Education* (2017). Here, the focus is not on General Education per se as a movement, nor on its rhetorical impact in terms of social class and marginalized students, though of course there are numerous titles over the last decade, significantly from sociologists studying higher education, that do address social inequities in higher education.[16]

Despite this fairly vast array of scholarship that exists on how and why General Education curricula should be revised, revamped, or rebooted, little specific attention has been paid to the rhetorical currency of Gen Ed as a movement with equalizing aims, including how writing curricula have been reduced and streamlined as a central part of Gen Ed, and how the Gen Ed movement's overall value has been depleted or negated entirely in the decades since the Harvard plan. The story I tell of Gen Ed in this book recovers that rhetorical history, toward my contention that its import—indeed, its rhetorical label—has shifted completely from *liberation* to *remediation*.

This shift has particularly dire consequences for the student groups who most frequently come to college campuses without test or other course credits, who are statistically speaking often first-generation students, students of color, and students from underserved areas (rural as well as urban). This aggregated population is a primary focus of concern in my story of Gen Ed, since its devaluation via pre-college mechanisms is even more potentially stratifying when we consider how such mechanisms often work in tandem with private tutoring and coaching usually afforded to upper-income students. Positionalities of lower-income, first-generation, and Black and Hispanic students toward college are also important in this conversation, as they inform how such students approach the curriculum itself. In addition to prevailing rhetoric regarding Gen Ed's use value, these students, as sociologist Ann L. Mullen has argued, "may embrace some elements of the instrumental order (e.g., the idea of earning a degree in order to obtain better employment) yet reject other aspects (e.g., the valorization of theoretical knowledge, and the assumption that holding theoretical knowledge enhances one's value)" ("You Don't" 143). This makes the higher purposes of General Education, as well as other subject matter, less translatable to students who are already influenced heavily by financial and social pressures related to college, even as such students are more likely to be required to take Gen Ed courses as part of a college degree than are their more affluent, suburban, white peers.

I thus argue that the problem, long since framed rhetorically as one of *access* to pre-college curricula and credits for these students at the margins, is much larger than this—and that therefore, such access arguments are a red herring. The real problem lies with the accepted equivalency that has emerged between General Education and underpreparedness, secondary to accelerated timelines for college completion and streamlined degree programs by agencies such as Complete College America (CCA). CCA contends that programs like dual credit and early college are equalizing, in that they increase college graduation rates

for students of color—hence providing important "momentum." CCA argues, "Data tells us the best way to create that momentum is to remove unnecessary barriers and ensure students hit essential milestones like completing gateway courses and accumulating credits as soon as possible" (https://completecollege.org/momentum/).

CCA's particular rhetorical stance—which uses "gateway" as a stand-in term for Gen Ed, and values credit "accumulation" over earned, scaffolded college coursework—creates a false equivalency between pre-college-level "milestones" to be dispatched in high school, and General Education curricula as a whole. This is the mantra that students internalize as further voiced by parents, mentors, pundits, and most importantly, universities themselves, encouraging students to test out of Gen Ed courses as much as possible. It is a race to *completion*, framed not so differently than one might describe a quest to win in one of those now ubiquitous "escape room" competitions, where one needs to find all the missing artifacts in order to unlock the door before the timer goes off. In the paradigm of a college education, the timer ticks ever loudly, and so everyone wants to find a way to shut it off and escape—with a college degree.

In this time-based framework, creating more access to AP curricula or other pre-college credit mechanisms simply feeds the beast of remediation arguments surrounding Gen Ed. To wit: If *every* entering college student took a full menu of Gen Ed courses, *on* college campuses, and if the United States' commitment to higher education would be reinvigorated such that college was truly affordable for all, then we would not need testing and pre-college credit programs, and we would not therefore need to expand access to them.[17] As a result, the very initiative that was meant to *better* prepare students in a variety of subjects as part of a holistic liberal education has been relegated to the margins of our curriculum, and reframed as coursework for the unlucky or the (deemed) unworthy among us.

Gen Ed, Rhetoric and Writing Studies, and Credits and Courses on the Ground

Ideally, the diverse group of readers of this book includes some from my own field of rhetoric and writing studies. These readers know that a crisis regarding the position of college writing in the curriculum has been present for decades, as defined by its labor and associated funding models, and its rapid decline as a standard experience for all first-year students—three issues that are not

mutually exclusive. Yet a surprisingly scant amount of the field's literature takes on the overarching mechanisms that hold our college writing program operations in place. And the *biggest* mechanism—General Education—has been mostly talked *around* in our field, rather than talked about, with a few notable exceptions, for example Branson's *Policy Regimes: College Writing and Public Education Policy in the United States*, Hansen and Farris's *College Credit for Writing in High School*, and Tinberg and Sullivan's *What Is College-Level Writing?* (volumes 1 and 2), as well as Adler-Kassner's *The Activist WPA*. Each of these are key policy-minded books to which my story of Gen Ed, and its framings, owes considerable debt.[18]

Just as I am not the first scholar to highlight the problems with shortcutting General Education curricula through pre-college programs, testing, or other similar means, neither have I been an innocent bystander to the industry that demeans Gen Ed, as a former writing program administrator, associate dean for curricula, department head, and now, a humanities school chair. From each of these vantage points, I have seen how Gen Ed as an ecosystem, and first-year writing as a biotic part of it, has been relegated to the margins of the curriculum and consequently earmarked for those who come to campus *lacking* the intellectual work in core subjects that heretofore was the provenance of college instruction alone.

As an associate dean of liberal arts, I managed Gen Ed from a global position, seeking to keep our college's Gen Ed enrollments appropriately high, because 99 percent of all the students at my university came through our college's doors by virtue of Gen Ed courses. My job entailed wrangling competing departmental requests to create new Gen Ed courses simply to boost unit-level enrollments, for revenue, while receiving regular pressure from outside forces—including the College Board itself—for quicker, easier, *seamless* ways for students to bring in pre-college credits in order to make way for either a shorter time to degree or a space for students to use the hours otherwise devoted to Gen Ed to complete a second major.[19]

Thus, I faced internally competing discourse: On the one hand, Gen Ed makes us (the college) money, as these are required courses offered on a massive scale almost exclusively in the liberal arts, and are intrinsic to our mission. On the other hand, students (and parents) want to spend their tuition dollars elsewhere in the college, on curricula they have been taught *matters more* than Gen Ed (including other colleges' majors and minors), so we should marginalize and minimize its place in our requirements in favor of investing in other

new degree programs and associated enrollments. To borrow from Elizabeth Bishop, the art of such losses and gains are, sadly, not hard for administrators to eventually master.

This balancing act was informed by the seventeen prior years I served as a writing program administrator (WPA) across three different universities. As a WPA, I oversaw the various means for exemption from first-year writing courses. On a local level correspondent to my own field identity, I faced similar internal contradictions to the later work I would do as an associate dean. I promoted the value of college writing courses, but I also learned that enrollment management is a complicated math problem, whereby there are never enough instructors to serve all the students, and that *this*—more than ability testing, curricular scaffolding, or course outcomes—drove how students entered and moved through our program.

Each university where I was a faculty member, true to all writing instruction being a local endeavor, had its own way of handling placement and enrollments, each of which I inherited as a WPA and was able to do little to change during my tenure. At my first university, placement was determined via a timed essay test, which decided whether students should go into basic writing, Comp I, or Comp II (the ubiquitous "research writing" course).[20] This was familiar to me, as it also had been our placement mechanism at my doctoral institution, where I oversaw placement as an assistant (graduate) director of composition. These were large-scale mechanisms designed to quickly and in rote fashion assess students' abilities upon intake and roughly place them into something resembling an acceptable starting point for their postsecondary literacy education.

At my second university, there was no placement test, but students could be exempted from one or both writing courses via AP Literature or Language exam or SAT English exam subscores. Since non-credit-bearing basic writing and basic math courses were not allowed at the college level, per that state's legislature, the intake placement mechanisms only determined whether students would be able to bypass one or two of the standard comp courses, not whether they needed an additional preparatory course as well. My third university, where I later undertook the associate dean responsibilities described above, had a program with a similar placement structure, with 50 percent of all students being exempted from the standard composition course by means of SAT English subscores, or AP Literature or Language scores.

These three universities took as a guiding principle that some reliable percentage would "place out" of the first-year writing sequence, in whole or in part. This was key to the labor model for teaching; as I used to remind our

staff, we *could not teach* all our first-year students each year if a significant percentage of them were not exempted. Our tenure-stream faculty did not teach these courses (at two of these three universities), and we did not have the non-tenure-track faculty to teach the whole first-year class. We also shared the belief that we should not grow our English graduate program to irresponsibly large levels *just* to bring on graduate TAs to staff sections of first-year writing, without a clear promise of academic jobs awaiting them upon completion.

Indeed, it's impossible to tell any story about General Education without first recognizing that it has become a system that students are literally *taught to bypass* in various explicit ways. It is also important to recognize that universities are economically shaped to rely on such bypassing of requirements, particularly first-year writing. Much like invitations to a wedding, wherein the bride assumes 20 percent of her guests will be unable to attend, or seating on an airplane, where maybe 5 percent of passengers will not show up before the boarding doors close, writing programs are built around a presence of absence—namely, the students who "test out" and bypass the requirement. Placement is thus but one of those ways that students can avoid first-year writing, through institutionally sanctioned means. The assumptions we make about students and their abilities through systems such as placement in 2026 are also the assumptions that James Bryant Conant in 1945 was hoping General Education might respond to and even negate. Placement is a means by which students can be segregated into the haves and the have-nots of our educational system, starting before the first day of college.

I have also been a parent participating in the unequal system of Gen Ed. Our daughter accumulated seventeen college credits from AP in high school, which gave her an exemption from first-year writing, history, and other social sciences. Even though her AP Language and Composition course was admittedly one of the best that she took in high school, others—notably the infamous APUSH (AP US History)—were no more than hectic and stress-inducing races to the finish line, with little time for deeper knowledge or applied learning. AP courses were the only advanced option available in many subjects at her high school, which did not do multilevel tracking as some other schools do. But throughout, our daughter's school counselor and the administration as a whole nonetheless pushed AP courses *hard* on many higher-income students and their parents, often regardless of their ability levels.

This is because high schools are rated by *US News and World Report* and other national aggregators on the basis of the number of AP courses they offer, the number of students who enroll in them, and the percentage of those students

who receive a "passing" score of 3 or higher on the exams themselves. So it behooves high schools to fill these courses with students whom they feel are the most likely to score well on the exam. According to *USNWR*, our daughter's high school at the time of this writing has a 39 percent participation rate in AP and a 30 percent pass rate. Our daughter, who is white, regularly questioned how a diverse school such as hers, with just over 50 percent Black and Hispanic students and 56 percent low-income enrollment students (of all races), could have myriad AP classes with one, or zero, African American or Hispanic students enrolled in them. Even though she knew the answer—and even though the College Board is aware of racial disparities in AP enrollments and claims to have made strides to address these—it makes the question no less necessary to voice, even as it is the case for families who are less financially fortunate or less educated on the perils of credit by exemption than ours that the pitfalls that I outline above are far outweighed by the perceived savings down the road in tuition dollars.

Indeed, cost-saving is at the heart of how many Gen Ed college courses are exempted, as well as central to parents' and students' concerns about the "repeat" work that they believe General Education curricula represent in relation to one's high school studies. Just as placement and tracking are critical to understanding how General Education and for-credit pre-college options operate as a linked system, one could easily argue that the history of General Education is also a history of labor struggles in academe justified by framing Gen Ed as a set of courses typically enrolled by lower-ability (read: without prior credit), marginalized students who do not "need" expensive instruction offered by tenure-stream faculty, at least not in massively enrolled courses like first-year writing and first-year math. As noted above, first-year writing programs at large universities are staffed significantly or exclusively by contingent faculty or graduate students. Lower-level math courses suffer the same annexed and contingent labor-based fate, while other Gen Ed courses in the sciences and social sciences that require less 1:1 instruction and scaffolding may be taught in massive lectures of hundreds of students, led by one faculty member but "sectioned" for discussions into smaller groups led by teaching assistants. It is only at the smallest colleges, and those without substantial graduate programs, that Gen Ed coursework is regularly and reliably taught by permanent faculty. And in many cases, those courses, especially in first-year writing, are rhetorically reframed as "seminars" that are topics-based and interdisciplinary (or what I like to call "fake comp").

Indeed, in 1946, then Dean of Liberal Arts at the University of Iowa and Gen Ed advocate and pioneer Earl James McGrath cited a proclamation by

James Bryant Conant himself that includes this key observation about the mechanics of teaching Gen Ed courses—focused on the sciences, secondary to Conant's training as a chemist: "To attempt in the same courses to instruct those who are *interested in science* as part of a General Education is almost a hopeless undertaking from the start. What seems to be needed here are new types of courses given out by the departments of physics or chemistry or biology, but undertaken by *a special staff* who will be concerned entirely with the problems of teaching science at the college level as part of a General Education" (qtd. in "General Education Movement" 7; emphases mine).

Two key points noted above continue to pervade General Education instruction today: first, that those who are "interested" in subjects (i.e., students majoring in said subject) should be segregated from those who do not share such core interests, and second, that those teaching the "interested" students aren't the right faculty to teach the uninterested. On the first point, Conant's early vision of Gen Ed required a buy-in on the part of faculty that students would be educated in *general* principles of the subject at hand, yet with equal ability to succeed through the trajectory of the course. Having students with higher-level interests and abilities makes teaching students without those in the same classroom understandably difficult, and is a phenomenon not completely avoidable in any classroom, but still a core principle for Gen Ed.

While this vision of separating students by interest *and ability* lies at the core of early Gen Ed principles, Conant's vision for General Education was both revolutionary in terms of its social aims and inextricable ties to democracy and the greater good, and also limited by his own views on structural hierarchies, both good and bad, in American secondary and postsecondary education. It is further true that Conant's version of General Education was a (fairly impatient) response to the increasing specialization that American universities were prioritizing in adoption of the German postsecondary teaching model, which we might simply summarize here as the rise of graduate teaching and the rejection of generalized instruction in favor of faculty choice and specialization in teaching assignments, which has led to the operational principles of American research-intensive institutions today.

Despite these historical truths about labor, testing, economics, and curriculum, the key position that first-year writing plays in the rise and subsequent downfall of General Education as an American enterprise, and the corresponding rhetorical import of the Gen Ed movement throughout the past eight pivotal decades of its existence, has yet to be part of our national narrative. But it needs to be. Simply put, we cannot tell the story of General Education without

including how it is *sold*—by testing corporations who hope families loathe it enough to avoid it via pre-college exemption; by universities who tout its benefits weakheartedly but advertise its various virtues come enrollment planning time; and by the general public, who increasingly demonize General Education, as noted above. We also cannot tell the story of first-year writing without recognizing its segmented place into Gen Ed and the constraints this place creates on the course's public and institutional value. These two stories of General Education are complex, intertwined, and interdependent.

About This Book

Across the following four chapters, I tell the eighty-year story of Gen Ed in roughly chronological order. Readers might thus divide this book into two conjoined stories: one about shared histories (chapters 1 and 2) and one about current controversies and problems (chapters 3 and 4), capped off by a reflection about the future of higher education itself (conclusion). In connecting the present to the past, I hope that readers might be introduced to both new texts and new ways of looking at what they see as familiar ones. Above all, I want you to come away from this book with a more complex—if less comfortable—understanding of what General Education has been, is, and ultimately could be.

Chapter 1 starts the story by situating the history of Gen Ed as one driven in part by the variable of student choices and curricular responses to those choices. It demonstrates the slow evolution of Gen Ed offerings and choices over time by undertaking a close reading of the first volume of two influential journals that emerged just three and a half years apart in the postwar era: *The Journal of General Education*, in October 1946, and *College Composition and Communication*, in March 1950. These journals illustrate the early story of the Gen Ed movement as it pervaded professional discourse in higher education, and in the field of rhetoric and writing studies. The first volume of *JGE* followed on the Redbook's aims, giving further voice to members of and consultants for the Harvard group as well as prominent proponents of the Redbook at other institutions and in public office. It also provided a platform for advancing Conant's ideals and served as a primer for his three books on higher education that would follow during the 1950s, at roughly five-year intervals. This chapter also shows how closely tied first-year writing instruction was to discourse about Gen Ed. Both *JGE* and *CCC* articulate their separate but allied aims for Gen Ed, and both take seriously the position of college faculty (and high school teachers)

in the pursuit of Gen Ed teaching—in *JGE*'s case, across multiple subjects. Yet they existed in parallel but not entirely overlapping rhetorical spaces in higher education. Their history is thus an important starting place for subsequent tales about the original intentions of Gen Ed, and where first-year writing fit into those intentions, past and present, and also sets up your reading of subsequent chapters that show how we have both emulated and rejected the Harvard group's proposals.

Chapter 2 moves from a story of two journals to a story of state policies and politics and how they affect the ways General Education does or does not serve students, using archives on higher education reform at the University System of Georgia (USG) and the twenty-six colleges and universities that currently make up that system. Because the USG has, since 1967, employed a common core curricula and since 1997, a common course-numbering system, its various institutions are linked together in a manner that differentiates it from many other public university state systems in the United States. This chapter examines the reasons why the USG's past and current revisions of its Gen Ed requirements came to be, and how these reflect interpretative leveling of what "core" coursework means for students studying at vastly different educational institutions. It also discusses similar initiatives at two other equally large and diverse university systems (University of Texas and University of Florida) as comparative and anchoring examples.

Chapter 2 ultimately argues that no state is immune to such policies, and that all citizens need to understand the mechanisms of General Education and higher education at the state level. It tells the story of the overarching aims of the USG Gen Ed program as it evolved (or failed to evolve) at three significant mile markers: 1954, 1961, and 1997—as well as current (2025) efforts to reframe the curriculum for public consumption across the system. Throughout this narrative, it spotlights USG's actions during segregation in the South, and how some decisions further marginalized Black students and also nullified local differences in pedagogy and curricular design. Plainly put, this chapter shows that the (hi)story of Gen Ed in the USG cannot be separated from contextual histories of segregationist practices.

Chapter 3 moves chronologically forward to tell national stories about General Education's current debates and controversies, which pit, as a core-credit program exemplar, Advanced Placement against Gen Ed's overall ideology, use value, and civic benefit. It argues that AP curricula in American high schools are propelled by rhetoric promoting uplift and economic advancement, including addressing the public's fears of Gen Ed in college taking up valuable time and

money. Focusing in part on first-year writing courses, this chapter divides the rhetoric surrounding pre-college credit by examination from the College Board into those of *competition*, *remediation*, and *efficiency*. While chapter 3 presents some data that may already be familiar to readers who follow such current debates, my focus on the rhetorical strategies of these initiatives and the fears and insecurities they play upon in American households, and in university strategic decisions, should be new to many others. As with the overall purpose of this book, I aim in chapter 3 to take what we think we already know and place it in the context of rhetorics regarding first-year writing, which is also increasingly seen as remedial and disproportionately enrolls first-generation students and students of color.

Chapter 4 takes the story of rhetorical strategies in promoting pre-college credit programming to a deeper disciplinary level, as a key factor in the evolution of the rhetoric of first-year writing over the last four decades. It argues that the disciplinary growth of rhetoric and writing studies has failed to consistently promote the value of first-year writing on college campuses. I situate this need for advocacy against the rise of dual enrollment / dual credit (DE/DC) nationwide, and the risk it poses to the sustainability of college writing programs as a whole. I compare the structurally equitable notions of General Education to the constructions of one local DE/DC program, OnRamps, in the University of Texas system. Questioning the ultimate value of the first-year course as serving one of two competing purposes—as a means of intellectual liberation for new college writers, versus a simple "sorting" and inoculation mechanism for "content" coursework that can be done through DE/DC outsourcing—in this chapter, I ask whether the story of public, rhetorical valuations of first-year college writing is being persuasively told. I further argue this rhetoric sidesteps public concerns about college writing as a central site for remediation or duplication within the overall Gen Ed curriculum.

Finally, my conclusion offers some contemplative observations on whether General Education, as a socioeducational movement, can still do the work that Conant and the Harvard group originally envisioned, given its primary function as keyed to "workforce development" in many states, and the general populace's mixed feelings about the value of a college degree in volatile political times. This chapter also highlights ongoing perceptions of how well colleges have historically addressed inequities in social class, especially following explosive college enrollments post–World War II. Finally, it spotlights the newly emerging story of the so-called paper ceiling and its allied nonprofit and corporate sponsorship, which speaks to anxieties about career trajectories for

current (Gen Z) students. And it outlines what new stories about Gen Ed might be pathways for the future, including a brief examination of one progressive local model that explicitly espouses the core values of Gen Ed, and aims to publicize those for greater uptake.

A Final Note About Process (and Stories)

Throughout this book I have provided links to information, reports, and studies publicly available online, and have also leaned on current news regarding General Education's histories and futures. This is a book whose topic is somewhat of a moving target, given that American colleges and universities—and the structures that support them—can change, consolidate, and disappear altogether in a moment, along with their Gen Ed enrollments, all in the name of financial solvency. So in order to represent the rhetorics guiding these changes, and tell a dynamic story, I need to be as current in my sources as possible. As such, I rely heavily on web-based reports and studies that offer up-to-the minute data. I realize that given the limitations of print genres, even more will happen with General Education, possibly good but mostly bad, while this book is going to press. I ask readers to therefore use my arguments here as a springboard for telling and retelling stories of Gen Ed on their own. My story is necessarily frozen in time, but the fragile life of Gen Ed marches on, especially for the students who have been made to believe that the substitutes, surrogates, and tests created to destroy it are actually designed to benefit their educational journeys and their lives beyond college.

Now, let's begin our story, a cautionary tale that has been heretofore relegated to the shadows of American history but is actually best told in the cold, bracing light of day.