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A VISION FOR GENERAL EDUCATION: THE LIFE AND MIND  
OF ERNEST L. BOYER

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Maria Lehr

May 2012

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Maria Elizabeth Lehr

entitled

A Vision for General Education: The Life and Mind of Ernest L. Boyer

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
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## Abstract

General education has always been an integral part of the college experience. It is at the very heart of what it means to be a liberal arts institution. Currently this curriculum is being revamped, revitalized and even questioned at many institutions. Many programs lack purpose and goals behind the curriculum. Ernest Boyer, through his work at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, created a unique vision and displayed exemplary passion for core curriculum in general education. This study focuses on Boyer's professional publications and highlights his work in higher education curriculum. His published works on general education through the Carnegie Foundation are synthesized to provide a literature review as a foundation for this project. Through archival research at the Boyer Center, a historiography using qualitative research methods analyzes certain influential events in Boyer's life as well as major themes and subthemes that emerged as part of his general education vision. Archives used included published and unpublished works such as speeches, personal notes, articles and interviews. Themes that emerged from this research include coherence, two goals for education and six themes for learning. These overarching themes and practices are then used to create an application and provide recommendations for how educators can use Boyer's vision to revitalize general education on college campuses today. Sections on limitations and further research provide areas of improvement on this topic and opportunities for future studies in regards to general education and Ernest Boyer.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

When the idea of writing about Ernest Boyer was first proposed to me, I had little idea of who he was or of his contributions to American higher education. As I began to read his articles and publications, a treasure trove of discovery was revealed. His passionate writing displayed a vision of higher education that could not be matched. His care and concern for the quality of education produced by colleges and universities was evident in every publication he penned.

The professional life of Ernest Boyer had him involved in many different higher education arenas. From faculty member to administrator to commissioner to researcher, Boyer experienced the gamut of higher education positions all which are displayed in his writings. His concern for the professoriate, love of history, duty toward civic engagement and passion for general education are just a few of the areas that Boyer poured his life and work into improving.

After considering the idea of writing about the personal life and professional work of Ernest Boyer, it became quickly obvious that to tackle all the areas in which he had an influence would result in a work far greater than I could produce. In order to effectively pay tribute to Boyer within this thesis, only one of his many passions could be displayed. One could discuss his new vision for the professoriate displayed in *Scholarship Reconsidered*. Civic engagement could also be addressed by harkening back to the glory

days of higher education and discussing what has moved us away from the old tradition of educating the population for the betterment of society. Even his work in connecting K-12 with colleges and universities could be an area of exploration. Despite the importance of and passion for each of these topics that Boyer displayed, the value and need for quality general education and core curriculum in higher education was a theme that seemed to appear within all of the above topics.

General education has had a long and tumultuous history in American colleges and universities. It has been created, destroyed, revamped and ignored since its founding during the Colonial America period. Nevertheless, Boyer understood the importance of such a curriculum; a curriculum that has been in recent years pushed to the wayside by educators. Today, general education exists at many colleges and universities, but it often lacks quality, understanding, or coherence, thus resulting in a series of what many would consider meaningless and disconnected courses. Perhaps this lack of attention to something that already exists is worse than it not existing at all. Boyer believed that if general education and core curriculum were to be a part of the college experience, then it should be given the attention it deserves.

The reason for this paper is to first to pay tribute to the passion, vision and ideas that was the career of Ernest Boyer. His accomplishments and publications were very influential in their day and continue to be valuable to current educators. The second reason stems from the general education concerns that colleges and universities are facing at present. General education and core curriculum are losing their vitality among various colleges and universities. Students do not seem to understand the importance of this curriculum and many faculty do not seem interested in sustaining what many perceive to

be a dying principle. The following information and analysis will help bridge this gap between educators and students by asking and resolving the following questions: What were the key elements of Boyer's vision for general education; what were the life experiences that influenced his passion; and how does this help redefine general education for academia today? The hope is that with this knowledge and understanding, faculty and administration may better comprehend the need for a philosophy and promise of general education, and therefore communicate its need to the current undergraduate population.

General education is much more than a series of random courses one must take to fulfill a degree. It is the element of education that connects us all. It is meant to prepare young people to engage with the world. The goals of general education are meant to create a generation of people who are well-rounded in their education, have the ability to read and write effectively and are able to connect to various events, times and people outside of any sort of specialization (Boyer & Levine, 1981). This was the vision of Boyer, and this study will attempt to encompass the content and meaning behind that vision for general education in America with the hope that educators throughout colleges and universities today may consider the core curriculum once again as it undergoes a period of reconstruction.

During my research, despite all the professional publications and extensive public career, there was an element of Ernest Boyer that remained a mystery; little has been done in the way of describing his personal life. A few authors have added personal components here and there, but nothing has been done in the way of an extensive biography. However, from a historical research perspective, this side of Ernie Boyer is

the key to understanding the vision that drove his work. By examining his early upbringing, developmental years at college and the influential people and events in his life one can come to a better understanding of what created his passion for higher education and the core curriculum. It is not enough to paraphrase his works; one must step deeper into the heart of his work, into his life and mind, which reflects this man's dedication to higher education.

Educators of the twenty-first century need to hear the voice of Ernest Boyer. When inspiration may be lacking, his eloquent writing sparks a fire deep within. When confusion blocks the road, his vision paves the way. When the pressures of education seem to be mounting, his passion will prevail. This is a call for all educators to revisit the core curriculum at each respective institution. Re-examine the purpose and attention given to the curriculum that affects every student who walks the halls of higher education. Take the time to listen to the advice given by Ernest L. Boyer. This thesis attempted to offer justification for why his wisdom is still valid today. There is a depth of understanding and a zeal we have only begun to grasp.

## Chapter 2

### **Literature Review**

#### **General Education and Ernest Boyer**

Many of the principles that drove the work of Ernest Boyer were related to problems he saw in the realm of higher education. According to Boyer, over time higher education had lost its sense of direction. One of the more inherent issues within higher education was the loss of public confidence that colleges and universities had experienced (Boyer & Hechinger, 1981). Boyer dedicated his professional career to renewing the general education system. Using history as a foundation and driving values and principles that could unite the academic world, Ernest Boyer not only defined the deep-seated problems in higher education but worked to discover solutions. He passionately advocated for a common, coherent set of values for education. He also championed community for a foundation in education and built his work from these ideas (Bucher & Patton, 2004).

The core curriculum of colleges and universities is one of the fundamental principles that drove Boyer's concerns. General education was one of the main areas that needed either reform or a return to its roots. Boyer argued that the college core curriculum had always been rooted in American social and intellectual life. However, with the 20<sup>th</sup> century came world events that led to a powerlessness felt by many, including colleges and universities (Boyer & Kaplan, 1977). Boyer extensively studied

and wrote about the history of colleges and college curriculum to help understand and return to the values that once drove American higher education. This research then allowed him to understand the intended goals and purposes of general education and, in turn, highlight the ways in which higher education has abandoned that original definition. Finally, Boyer mastered a vision, one that would stand the test of time. This vision, and the process through which he approached it, is somewhat captured in the following sections so that educators today might get a glimpse of the mind of Ernest Boyer.

### **History of General Education**

Little can be understood if there is no acknowledgement of the past. Everything has a history, and history defines what that idea was and what it will continue to be. Boyer firmly believed this to be the same for general education in America and often times in his work included his own synthesis and interpretation of history. Throughout its history, general education has been twisted, prodded, revitalized and reborn. Boyer would often begin his interpretation of general education history with a look at the classical curriculum. While general education and the classical curriculum are not synonymous, they do share some similar attributes that Boyer appreciated. Originally, college curriculum during the colonial period was cohesive; the Puritans constructed curriculum morally and intellectually. The purpose of education was to produce learned ministers and an educated class of laymen and to pass along religious ideals to the culture (Boyer & Kaplan, 1977). America's first colleges and universities were actively united behind this coherence of mission and vision. This purpose behind American higher education began at Harvard with the Puritans and was followed by many of the Ivy League schools including William & Mary, Yale, Princeton and Dartmouth. Each was rooted in a

different denomination but held to the same broad purposes of civil unity and disciplined leadership (Rudolph, 1990). The framework for curriculum was built around the goal of training clergy and also educating people for civic leadership. The academic core was wholeheartedly accepted and not questioned (Boyer, 1987). At that time, the curriculum was not available to practical vocations. For many, education still rested on parents and the family trade (Rudolph, 1990). Generally, students were of the wealthy class. Once in school, all men participated in the same classical course structure (Boyer & Kaplan, 1977). The curriculum at Harvard and other colonial schools was a product of the Renaissance and was greatly influenced by European schools such as Cambridge and Oxford (Rudolph, 1990). Students studied logic, Greek and Hebrew, rhetoric, history and botany in their first year. During their second year they included the study of ethics, politics and divinity. The last year culminated in arithmetic, astronomy and divinity (Boyer, 1987).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century brought about a wave of individualism when new courses were added to the classical curriculum and the Enlightenment encouraged a growth in scientific knowledge (Boyer, 1987). The curriculum had to respond to the changes that America experienced. Science courses were slowly added to the curricula of many colonial colleges. Curriculum and education were not stationary elements, but rather evolved and changed according to events and cultural developments (Rudolph, 1990). As the notion of a mass society emerged in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, so did the idea that college must be popular and intellectual while meeting the demands of the changing nation (Rudolph, 1990). The Land Grant Act created a practical spin on general education and also opened the door for the elective system. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, classical

education was widely opposed (Boyer, 1987). With the rise in urbanization and industrialization, the country placed new demands on America's colleges. The elective system provided a set of practical courses for students that would better prepare them for the roles they would assume in the new society (Ringenberg, 2006).

The first revival of general education came during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century around the time of World War I. The President of Amherst College, Alexander Meiklejohn, introduced a survey course entitled "Social and Economic Institutions," which was to act as an introduction to "humanistic sciences" (Boyer & Levine, 1981). Because of this, President Meiklejohn became known as the father of the survey course. He believed general education to be an antidote to specialization. His partner, John Dewey, also favored this type of education, describing the survey course as "an integrative experience underlying the unity of knowledge" (Boyer & Levine, 1981, p. 2). Both thought that the college curriculum suffered due to the rapid expansion of knowledge. In 1919, Columbia University introduced "Contemporary Civilization," which all freshmen were required to take. Dartmouth and Reed soon followed suit and by the early 1920s a full revival was in force (Boyer & Levine, 1981).

The events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a major effect on the course of general education. World War I marked a significant shift back to the foundations of general education. During this time of war, leaders were convinced that general education could unite the people under the definition of a common problem and, hopefully, a common solution. Therefore, the survey courses at Amherst, Columbia, Dartmouth and Reed rapidly became successful (Boyer, 1987). In many ways, this movement toward general education was seen as a reflection of society at the time along with Teddy Roosevelt's



Square Deal. It reflected many ideals within Progressivism including social welfare and reform. Some hoped that general education would fight the disillusionment and loss of national unity that resulted from the end of the war (Boyer & Levine, 1981). The Chicago Plan is an excellent example that addressed this need but was also quite contested. This plan included elements such as varying degrees, great books, interdisciplinary courses and comprehensive exams (Boyer, 1987).

If the war hastened general education reform, the Great Depression hurried it away. The Depression created a shift from general to vocational education which essentially ended the revival. The next revival very much mirrored the first, only with a Second World War and instead of a Square Deal, a New Deal (Boyer & Levine, 1981). The aftermath of World War II sparked the same kind of revival. The publication of Harvard's report titled *General Education in a Free Society* became a national symbol for general education. The purpose was a "quest for a concept of general education that would have validity for the free society which we cherish" (Boyer, 1987, p. 65). This 267-page report was produced by Harvard faculty after two years of study and \$60,000 worth of expenses. It outlined an agenda for general education not only at Harvard but for the higher education community at-large (Boyer & Levine, 1981).

Post WWII, societal needs once again turned to college campuses for answers. Integrating GIs and immigrants, training people for civic duty and promoting self-realization were just a few of the many needs that were placed upon higher education. General education saw numerous attacks in the decades that followed (Boyer & Levine, 1981). Between the World Wars, the crash of the stock market and the Red Scare, the nation suffered under an array of dramatic public events. Higher education felt these

events as well as other pressures including the movement of the mass society, the new modern life, pluralism and rationality (Boyer & Kaplan, 1977). It is a wonder that general education survived under these conditions. But just like a nation and its people, it had to find its identity; in a way, it experienced an almost complete rebirth.

### **Definition and Purpose**

With the history readily displayed, one must now go about defining what exactly is meant by the term general education. General education has traditionally been hard to define. Boyer described general education as “the breadth component of college education” (Boyer & Levine, 1981, p. 2). However agreement on that breadth quickly fades. According to Boyer, “general education is the spare room of academia with no one responsible for its oversight and everyone permitted to use it as he will...without some consensus about its purpose and meaning, the scores of different interpretations and definitions tend to cancel each other out” (Boyer & Levine, 1981, p. 3). Although Boyer does not state an explicit definition for general education, the following agenda may add clarity and understanding as to how Boyer felt general education should be used:

To embrace those experiences, problems, relationships, ethical concerns, and sources of conflict that are common to all of us simply by virtue of our membership in the human family and in a particular society, at a given moment in history. Placed in historical context, general education appears to us to be an educational reaffirmation of the social bond that joins all people. (Boyer & Levine, 1981, p. 58)

The following explanation is based on Boyer's professional publications dealing with general education. This should add clarity and understanding as to what general education should really mean to faculty, administrators and students.

It should be noted that the terms general education and core curriculum are used synonymously within this paper, in the same fashion as most of Boyer's writings. In the same vein, it is important to note that general education and liberal arts are not synonymous terms. General education refers to one specific part of curriculum while the term liberal arts is more all-encompassing. When these terms are used interchangeably, general education seems to get lost in the mix (Boyer & Levine, 1981).

Boyer and The Carnegie Foundation, in *A Quest for Common Learning*, stated that "the mission of general education is to help students understand that they are not only autonomous individuals, but also members of a human community to which they are accountable" (Boyer & Levine, 1981, p. 24). Core curriculum in the past was guided by this idea of commonality; an idea that education has since moved away from (Boyer & Kaplan, 1977). General education should focus on interdependence, on the experiences that bring individuals together into a community (Boyer & Levine, 1981). Instead, Boyer's undergraduate students were often products of individualism who viewed community as a weak entity (Boyer, 1987). There was a time when colleges and universities were to be collectively called into the struggles that the nation was facing as well as to help solve social and economic problems, but the federal government rarely calls upon higher education today (Boyer & Hechinger, 1981). Perhaps the move toward individualism has negated general education's purpose to reach the outside world.

To have curriculum rooted in the individual is not sufficient. It must be shared within a larger community. The goal of general education is to affirm our connectedness, though that does not necessarily mean harmony. In fact, many times the issues dealt with in general education create conflict, controversy or at least a variety of opinions (Boyer & Levine, 1981). Typically, general education existed within traditional academic disciplines, such as English, history, biology and art. These subjects were put into departments and then grouped into divisions such as humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. General education goes one step further to include interdisciplinary courses in order to bridge the gap between departments. Some schools even organized interdisciplinary general education courses according to specific topical themes hoping to create more coherent learning for students. Therefore, general education evolved in two distinct ways: either through traditional disciplines or interdisciplinary courses or themes. These modes only partially met the intended goals of general education (Boyer & Levine, 1981).

During the era when Boyer was writing on general education, the most common structure at colleges and universities was the distribution requirement. Within this requirement, students must take a minimum number of courses or credits in several areas of study. There seems to be a general education continuum: core, distribution and electives. Core holds that all students should learn the same thing in the same way. Pure elective holds that all people need to know different things and should learn them in a variety of ways. Distribution holds that students need to know “generally” the same thing but can learn in a variety of ways (Boyer & Levine, 1981). During Boyer’s research in the 1980s, the distribution requirement was the typical general education program for

about 90% of colleges and universities around the nation (Boyer, 1987). Within the distribution requirement, students were required to take a minimum number of courses or credits in several areas of study (Boyer & Levine, 1981). While this program does seem well-balanced, it does little in the way of showing students the connections between courses and disciplines as students essentially pick and choose their way to graduation (Boyer, 1987).

Coherence is needed within the core in order to enable students to make meaning of their lives and the world around them. General education is achieved when the disciplines touch each other, when bridges are built and curriculum is applied to the purposes of life (Boyer, 1987). College curriculum as a whole can do ample work to recognize both needs with specialization through majors and the core curriculum as another learning piece. General education pays heed to our independence and interdependence, balancing individual preferences and community needs (Boyer & Levine, 1981).

### **Faculty Perceptions**

Little can be accomplished in the way of general education without the inclusion of the most important group of people: the faculty. There are numerous issues that surround this group of individuals ranging from the spectrum of quality of campus environment to organizational structure of administration. General education, however, is unique to faculty because they are completely in control of curriculum, the driving force behind its creation and implementation. Boyer turns to their scholarship in order to better understand faculty perceptions of general education.

Currently on many college campuses, academic departments are segregated from one another and the core curriculum lacks coherence. In many ways, the perception of faculty scholarship reflects the individualism that is currently driving higher education. A majority view of the professoriate equates scholarship with research and that scholarship is measured according to the amount of publications one possesses. In some cases this notion is causing faculty members to grow more apathetic about their role as professor, which weakens the vitality of the university at-large. The evolution of the professoriate can be simplified to this: teaching, then service and finally research. However it is time to move past the debate of teaching versus research and realize that scholarship does include engaging with original research, but it also requires connections and communicating that knowledge to others, much like the purposes of general education (Boyer, 1990b). Communicating this knowledge across disciplines can break down the academic silos that hinder general education. It can increase interdisciplinary work and enhance the idea of connectedness that Boyer felt was the key to general education.

Faculty members are the key to general education. Many of their actions and pursuits are mirrored in the purposes and happenings of the core curriculum. Curriculum may be well constructed and a college may understand its purpose, but it is the faculty who will determine the overall quality of general education at each given institution (Boyer & Levine, 1981). Many times faculty members are at a crossroads. While the vitality of general education rests on their shoulders, there are also professional obligations and pressures enforced by the current academic culture that require time and energy. Professors are often concerned with tenure and promotion which focuses more on research rather than counseling and advising students (Boyer, 1990b). Faculty members

who teach heavily in general education courses could easily feel anxiety when the review for tenure comes. Career promotion and prospects often leave faculty no choice but to lessen their commitment to core disciplines (Boyer & Levine, 1981). Colleges were weakened by this confusion over goals and it can even lead to a diminished spirit of community (Boyer, 1990b).

### **General Education for the Common Good**

From the beginning of the Colonial period, colleges were seen as an obligation to the nation. Common education was pushed not for individual gain but to promote civic advancement and participation, to share in a heritage and vision for a government and nation (Boyer, 1990a). From the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution to the Land Grant colleges of the Civil War, the purposes of higher education and American society were interlocked. There was a time when practicality, reality and serviceability were words that academic leaders used to describe higher education. The partnership that used to exist between higher education and society is one that provided quality gains for the nation and also boosted the confidence of individual institutions. However, this relationship has weakened over the years (Boyer, 1996).

The public has lost confidence in higher education. Colleges and universities are no longer at the center of the nation's work and problems. For the first time in decades, higher education is not caught up in a common national endeavor (Boyer, 1996). Current foreign affairs and economic conditions are creating new issues for America's government. Now more than ever colleges need to educate citizens who are prepared to make critical decisions based on knowledge instead of blind belief (Boyer, 1990a). There is also a growing feeling that higher education is more of a private benefit rather than a

public good, again an issue that only widens the gap between learning and civic engagement (Boyer, 1996). Little is done to display the relevancy of the academy within the civic, social, economic and moral problems of the country (Boyer, 1996).

Civic education must be present in the classroom as an active part of the curriculum. It should help students understand differences between cultures and also help them make connections between what they learn and how they live (Boyer, 1990a). As a society we must care about connections. We cannot deny our common existence, our relationships with one another. Educators must focus on the aims of common learning (Boyer, 1982). For Boyer, service rested at the center of academics, consisting of care for the other, selflessness and building up the community, each of which calls for specific action. Colleges must expand understanding and experience in the world to their students. With these components incorporated into academic life, students can better meet the needs of society. Using pedagogical practices that apply real-life situations to theoretical knowledge will enable students to search for an identity and meaning beyond their self-interest that allows them to deal with societal issues, community development and empowerment (Bucher & Patton, 2004).

### **Boyer's Vision**

Boyer's vision for general education emerged out of his study of its history, defining the term and all the elements that may affect this education, including but not limited to faculty perceptions and civic engagement. Outlining his vision for the core curriculum will help define the research and analysis in the following sections of this paper. His vision is very much a combination of the information outlined above.



Boyer, first and foremost, advocated that general education should have a central focus on community. The core curriculum is meant to investigate what we all share (Boyer & Kaplan, 1977). Education should stress shared membership in groups and institutions, not in the way of the traditional civics courses but with a goal of helping students to understand that everyone shares these common institutions within our culture (Boyer & Levine, 1981).

One of the problems within higher education today that hinders this common quest is that students seem to be focused on jobs; vocationalism dominates the curriculum. Individualism seems to be the driving force within the current academic experience of undergraduate students. Students are focused on fulfilling their individual majors and are far less concerned with general education. Today, departmentalization defines academics. Curriculum should not be as fixed as it was in the early days of Harvard nor should it be defined by separation and divisions as it is today. The vastness and specialization of knowledge has led to virtually no shared common goals (Boyer, 1987). Perhaps general education can act as an antidote to the narcissism present in today's college students. Self-absorption, declining activism in citizenship and loss of strong national leadership, among many other factors, has led to a domestic isolationism. Through general education the "Me Generation" may be nudged from its self-absorption (Boyer & Levine, 1981, p. 7).

The vision for Boyer's general education dream was rooted in the importance of history and the centrality of language. Boyer promoted the idea that the only way to understand our common inheritance as humans was by looking at our common past. To simply be told that events have taken place, ideas have been made or people have come

and gone is not enough. We must determine what these events have to do with us, how we are shaped by their occurrences, reconcile how we are controlled by them and essentially learn from them (Boyer & Kaplan, 1977). The agenda of general education should consist of those experiences, relationships and ethical dilemmas that have left their mark on the human race, and it can act as an affirmation to society's claim on that history (Boyer & Levine, 1981).

### **Summary**

For Boyer, general education existed as an all-encompassing, integrated core of America's colleges and universities. The history of higher education and the American people defined a vision that we have since abandoned. General education is meant to help students understand that they are not just autonomous individuals but members of a common society. Curriculum should be guided by this interdependency. Boyer believed that bridging the gap between disciplines and creating well-balanced academic programs should be the goals of general education at any given institution. The key to implementing programs with these types of purposes is faculty buy-in. Faculty must feel empowered and motivated to participate in general education courses. However, today's academic environment has been less than encouraging in this regard.

Promoting general education on behalf of the common good was another element Boyer advocated. Incorporating civic education into the classroom advances one of the original goals of general education: to build up community and make connections between what students learn and how they live. With these elements, educators can development and implement core curriculum with a coherent philosophy and common purpose and thus fulfill the vision of Ernest Boyer.

## Chapter 3

### **Methodology**

Historical research or a historiography is an examination of a specific history. However, this type of research is more than just facts, timelines and a series of events. Although a historiography does much in the way of retelling facts, making connections between pieces of information and creating a descriptive nostalgia, it distinguishes itself by going one step further. It attempts to recapture the past and take the events, people and ideas that have gone before us and show how they can still influence and shape the present. Therefore, the current study goes beyond facts and figures; it investigates the purpose and ideas that created events. Historical research analyzes the relationships between issues and allows a researcher to slip into the past in order to create a better future. The ultimate goals of historical research are to uncover the past, ask questions and seek answers, discover implications and relationships, and make connections (Berg, 1995).

An analytic process of qualitative research methods was used to guide the research in this study. This process requires inferred meaning and judgment making on behalf of the researcher. Relationships in the way of themes, patterns, and refrains are sought by analyzing different examples such as artifacts and documents from the past and present (Given, 2008). In this case, archival resources will be relied upon for the bulk of the research. Robert Connors (1992), in his chapter from *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research*, proposes three primary parts of traditional historical analysis that

can be applied to archival research: external criticism, internal criticism, and synthesis of materials. These are not stages that exist within a certain order but rather work as repeated steps that can happen in various orders. External criticism deals with the types of sources available and which ones the historian will choose to use. Internal criticism examines the sources found by the researcher and includes an analysis of language, search for bias and confirmation of claims made by the researcher. The final stage of this analysis is a synthesis of materials. Here, the researcher adds structure to the compiled sources, gathering generalizations, cause and effects, patterns and themes (Connors, 1992).

This thesis is a historiography of Ernest Boyer that consists of primary and secondary documents detailing his life, vision and writings. These documents were used in two different fashions. The first dealt with Boyer's personal life; letters, journals and other materials are combined to form a historiography of Ernest Boyer's foundational years through his college experience and ending at the beginning of his professional career. The majority of these documents were obtained through the Ernest Boyer Center and Archives at Messiah College.

The second set of data is a combination of primary and secondary sources that outline Boyer's professional life, including a vast majority of Boyer's own publications from his time with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Secondary sources also include the research and analysis of others that have used Boyer's thoughts and vision prominently in their work for higher education. These sources were obtained through a variety of online databases as well as the Taylor University's Zondervan Library and Messiah College's Boyer Archives.

Together these sources create a historical overview of the life and works of Ernest L. Boyer. From this detailed information, an analysis can be given that reflects the purpose and ideas that drove this great educator.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

#### Biographical Data

One is hard pressed to find someone in higher education with more significant credentials than Ernest Boyer. He spent two years at Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania before he graduated *cum laude* from Greenville College with a Bachelor of Arts degree (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1980). He then went on to earn a Master's and Doctorate degree in Speech Pathology and Audiology at the University of Southern California. His dissertation on the psychology of speech looked at the impact of stress on communication disorders. After the completion of his degree, Boyer received the NIH grant for post-doctoral study at the University of Iowa Hospital. There he lectured in the Department of Otolaryngology and researched the effectiveness of a new surgical procedure for middle ear deafness (Biographical data, 1971).

Ernest Boyer held numerous positions within higher education. He was a member of the teaching faculty at the University of Southern California. In 1956 he became the Dean of Instruction at Upland College, CA. During his tenure, the college was awarded accreditation by the Western College Association and the State Department of Education for teacher credentialing. After Upland, he joined the University of California, Santa Barbara as Director of the Center for Coordinated Education. He left Santa Barbara to

join the State University of New York as Executive Dean for University-wide Activities (Biographical data, 1971).

From 1970-1977 Boyer served as the Chancellor of the State University of New York, the largest university in the United States with 64 institutions and more than 350,000 students (“College for Prisoners,” 1974). In 1977, he left his Chancellor position to become the 23<sup>rd</sup> Commissioner of Education, administering a \$12 billion federal agency. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1980, he joined the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as President (Carnegie Foundation, 1980). It was during his time as President of the Carnegie Foundation that his most influential work emerged in general education, campus community and faculty engagement.

These are fairly well-known achievements and credentials, but Boyer accomplished many things that were less visible to the public. During his lifetime he received 35 honorary doctorates, including three in 1971 alone from Chapman College, Dowling College and the University of Southern California (Biographical data, 1971). Through a Ford Foundation Grant, Boyer introduced an experimental mid-year term at Upland College which many colleges label as the “January term” (Biographical data, 1971). He was listed as one of the top educators in the nation for five years by *U.S. News and World Report* (Carnegie Foundation, 1980). As Chancellor of SUNY, he initiated a five-year review of college presidents, developed an experimental three-year degree program, launched a new non-campus institution called Empire State College and set up a college for prison inmates at Bedford Hills (“College for Prisoners,” 1974).

## Foundational Experiences

A major focus of this research was on the specifics of Boyer's professional career and, after being analyzed, it is clear that those formative experiences launched his quest and vision of general education. Language and communication were the roots of his education, significant to him from his first day of school and compelling him through to achieving a Ph.D. in the field. Boyer often cited his first grade teacher, Miss Rice, as someone who inspired his education, recalling in an essay:

Above all, Miss Rice had a message to convey. She taught me that excellence in education is measured not by true-false tests or by putting Xs on a piece of paper. Excellence, I learned, is measured by the mastery of language, by the ability of each student to communicate with care. And if I had one wish, it would be that every child during his or her first day of school would hear some teacher say:

“Good morning class. Today we learn to read.” (Boyer, n.d., *Today We Learn*)

Miss Rice taught him that language is more than just another subject, instilling in him the concept that language “is the means by which all other subjects are pursued” (Boyer, n.d., *Today We Learn*). That notion would stay with him throughout the rest of his life and career. It was Miss Rice who first taught him that writing is a central theme of self-expression, that through clear writing, clear thinking can be taught. From an early age, Boyer also learned the power of speech—that it is how we communicate feelings and ideas, how we are judged and judge others. Miss Rice probed with questions that stirred his imagination and creativity. Through her, Boyer also learned that communication refers not just to words but music, dance and the visual arts. Boyer loved Miss Rice for her enthusiasm, belief in students, integrity and warmth (Boyer, n.d., *Today We Learn*).



These lessons that Boyer learned from Miss Rice at the earliest of ages affected and helped create his vision for general education.

Another formative experience is Boyer's short, but influential time at Messiah College. Boyer remembered his time at Messiah with great fondness. According to Boyer, "Messiah encouraged young people to take a step beyond where they were" (Sides, 1984). Coming from a large, secular high school, Boyer described feeling fragmented and separated from the school's social events due to his religious background. At Messiah, his school realm and religious realm were integrated, which he found liberating. Though conservative and regulated, Messiah brought people together from around the country. The college was interested in a student's entire growth (Sides, K.J., 1984). Boyer's foundational experiences at Messiah shaped his view of the impact that college campuses should have on undergraduate students. Part of this impact exists within the classroom through curriculum that cared about values and a full integration of faith and learning. Within Boyer's general education vision, one can see elements of this idea, along with a focus on the whole person.

Boyer was interested in new and innovative ways of learning even during his college years. For Professor Mulholland, he wrote an essay on teaching civics in which he described man not only as an individual but as a member of society, as part of a community. When teaching civics, goals should be to teach historical facts, prepare for effective citizenship and learn to tolerate the opinion of others (Boyer, n.d., *Teaching on Civics*). Although these thoughts are specifically related to civics, this idea works as an example in which we can see certain undertones emerge that would be staples within Boyer's vision for general education.

From these early experiences, the foundation was laid for Boyer's general education vision. Through these formative experiences, from his childhood to his undergraduate years, Boyer's work begins to take its shape.

### **Themes and Subthemes**

The analysis of Boyer's professional and personal work, both published and unpublished, produced the following findings which are split into the most common themes, along with subthemes, that emerged as a result of this data. The major themes include coherence, two main goals of education and six themes for education. Subthemes include vocationalism and individualism, faculty involvement, connectedness, curriculum and civic engagement.

### **Coherence**

Oftentimes, Boyer began his writings or speeches with a look at the past. In his own interpretation of history, he would look to the historical roots of general education and its evolution throughout American history to explain education's current state, beginning with the colonial colleges of America, weaving through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and ending with the problems his generation was facing. Throughout this process, Boyer explained how general education had common goals and coherence. Colleges and universities had goals that were established by charters and were clearly met within the curriculum. From the classical foundations of William & Mary, which he often used as an example, and past the Revolution, curriculum was guided by common values and coherence. There was a common view of how minds should be trained; community, church and the education system worked together because they had the same values that could be reinforced within each entity (Boyer, n.d., *Looking at the*

*Curriculum*). The assumptions about college education were clear. Curriculum was firmly prescribed and promotion to the next level was strictly monitored. In Boyer's words, "education, to put the matter simply, was driven by a vision of coherence" (Boyer, n.d., *Looking at the Curriculum*, p. 2). General education underwent many reforms from the Revolution to the Civil War, but coherence was only reinforced (Boyer, February 1980). The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries introduced the "free electives" system which tried to embrace commonality. The freedom of self-determination was considered common and the right to be autonomous and unique was shared (Boyer, September 1981). However with a curriculum focused on individuality and the uniqueness of people, commonality was hard to sustain (Boyer, n.d., *Looking at the Curriculum*).

Higher education, Boyer explained, experienced a "golden era" from 1945-1965. It was described by the word expansion where great changes were made to colleges and universities. From the late 1960s to the early 1970s a period of confrontation began. The purpose of colleges and universities was called into question due to student unrest. After the events of the 1970s, there was a loss of public confidence in higher education and an era of retrenchment set in. The mid 1980s, the era in which Boyer started working on general education in full force, brought a time of reshaping of education (Boyer, n.d., *Changing Priorities*).

**Vocationalism and individualism.** As a result of this loss of coherence, vocationalism dominated higher education. Boyer believed that general education died because commonality of self-won over commonality of substance. Unity and coherence were shadowed by radical individualism. Higher education experienced a major disconnect in what the students thought, what the university was actually conveying and

what the university could do. Students during Boyer's time, and many still today, were worried about jobs and focused on a narrow vocationalism. In a 1980's report for the Carnegie Foundation, when college students were asked to rank the goals of their education, there was a shift away from values and toward a preoccupation with vocation. Students often described general education as "an irritating hurdle" (Boyer, 1986, "Higher Education"). Boyer's students were focused on individual gratification. They saw the world as fractured. They were also educationally competitive, geared toward job training and committed to getting higher grades. Overall, they were optimistic about their personal futures but pessimistic about the future of the nation and the world (Boyer, January 1982b). This view of the student is certainly not negative. However, due to the vocational drive of Boyer's students and the concern for their major, the amount of time and effort put toward general education courses decreased. The humanities specifically, a longtime associate of general education, lost value among students (Levine, 1980).

Colleges and universities on the other hand allowed skills training to become the emphasis that dominated the campus. Schools were confused as how to best impart the shared values that were once part of a coherent system of higher education (Boyer, 1986, "Higher Education"). The self-preoccupation and social isolation of students was only exacerbated by colleges (Boyer, 1988). Colleges and universities allowed knowledge to be separated into academic units and failed to articulate a common purpose for education (Boyer, February 1982). Schools encouraged this individualistic mindset with electives based on individual interest. There was no agreement among college educators about the meaning of education (Boyer, January 1982b). Higher education had not only lost its sense of purpose but also the values and understanding that used to exist between liberal

education and the workforce. It promoted the idea of the “academic supermarket” which Boyer often spoke out against. In this model, students basically shop around for four years; picking and choosing the classes they want to take (Boyer, n.d., *Looking at the Curriculum*). Higher education seemed more confident about the length rather than the substance of education (Boyer, December 1980). Colleges had no agreement on what it meant to be an educated person, and diversity replaced unity as the guiding principle in academics (Boyer, 1980).

When giving a speech on general education, Boyer would typically offer a caveat. He believed that students should follow their own interests, aptitudes and pursue their own academic goals, but he asserted that they also must be able to move beyond themselves, have fundamental skills, social perspectives and be able to see themselves in relation to other people and time (Boyer, 1980). Reaffirming general education does not mean diversity should be diminished in education; rather, individuals should be cherished in a nation that recognizes many cultures, defends the rights of minorities and preserves the right to dissent. General education should help students understand the claims of the larger society that gives meaning to their lives (Boyer, January 1982b).

Higher education needed to find a balance between careerism and the broad aims of liberal learning (Boyer, 1986, “Higher Education”). This balance would create a blending of legitimate interest in vocation with the broader interest of living a valued life (Boyer, n.d., *Challenge of Quality*). Higher education has made sacrifices in order to hasten knowledge, such as the breaking up of academic disciplines. Through history in order to accelerate the gathering of knowledge, universities have divided courses of study into specialized departments, institutes and fragmented academic programs, leading to a

break up of knowledge or perhaps better understood as a break up of our perceptions of knowledge. The focus should return to the unity of knowledge (Boyer, R006-005). Boyer wanted colleges and universities to challenge the assumption that individualism reigns supreme, that along with students' purposes, the college has purposes of its own (Boyer, February 1980). This was not to say that students should not have any choice in education, but colleges should also have convictions about the breadth of education which must work alongside individual choice and preference (Kurtis, 1981). Boyer wanted to challenge the assumption that individualism is the centrality of higher learning. During a speech about curriculum, Boyer stated, "I believe we must begin to state quite clearly that in addition to the purposes of students as individuals, which is sacred, the college has purposes of its own which reflect the commonness that brings us all together on the planet Earth" (Boyer, n.d., *Looking at the Curriculum*, p. 8). Colleges should work to bridge the gap between general and specialized education as they often times exist as two competing camps (Boyer, November 1986).

**Faculty involvement.** When speaking on general education, Boyer made a conscious effort to include the most important group: the faculty. Faculty were and still are essential players in the success of general education. Without their buy-in, general education courses would be impossible. However, the lack of coherence that plagued higher education at-large was also present within the faculty. Many were loyal to their professions over their institutions (Boyer, February 1982). Even before Boyer, Alvin Goulder described this problem using the terms local and cosmopolitan. A local faculty member was concerned with the organization while a cosmopolitan was more concerned with the profession (Goulder, 1957). Faculty members feared that they would lose touch

with their disciplines if they devoted too much of themselves to general education.

Tenure and promotion were usually the first of their concerns and often times they were not rewarded for their work in general education (Boyer, February 1982). Boyer put great faith and weight on the work of the faculty stating,

I can only say that if a college still has a soul and has an intentional vision of itself it will, through its faculty and administrators, be able seriously to inquire as to what those priorities are that transcend individual interests. (Boyer, n.d., *Challenge of Quality*)

Boyer believed that the individualism present in higher education could be combatted by faculty and administration and charged both these groups with this task.

### **Two Main Goals**

As a result of this incoherence, Boyer proposed two main goals for general education:

To prepare us to live independent, self-sufficient lives so we can be economically and socially empowered. To help us go beyond our private interests and put our lives in historical, social, ethical and spiritual perspective. (Boyer, March 1987)

Three sub-themes emerged from these two main goals for education: connectedness, curriculum and civic engagement. These sub-themes take a more in-depth look at the overarching framework of these two goals.

**Connectedness.** Boyer wholeheartedly believed and advocated that we discover ourselves as we discover our connections (Boyer, March 1987). Students did not seem to realize that even though we are not uniform, differences do not mean we have nothing in common (Boyer, March 1987). People do exist as autonomous individuals with personal

aptitudes but we are also deeply dependent on each other (Boyer, March 1987). In education, as in life, we must find ways to affirm our independence while acknowledging our interdependence. Boyer believed that education was the place in which these two seemingly disparate goals were connected (Boyer, January 1980). Human beings are part of a larger community to which we are held responsible. General education should focus on the experiences that create this community (Boyer, January 1982b). Boyer advocated that uniformity and interrelatedness were not synonymous terms. While we are not uniform human beings, we are still interdependent (Boyer, 1981). Students must understand their connection with the past and our connectedness today (Boyer, n.d., *Looking at the Curriculum*). Ultimately, general education should connect what we learn and how we live. In Boyer's words, "learning is the staging ground of life," and "we must avoid knowledge without wisdom, commitments without conscience and science that is not guided by the sacred" (Boyer, March 1987, p. 14).

**Curriculum.** During Boyer's higher education tenure, the distribution requirement was the most common form of general education. Boyer found the distribution requirement to be an unfulfilling agent of education. He described it as a "grab bag of courses" or a "hodge podge" of education (Boyer, 1988, p. 4). The distribution requirement revealed incoherence of purpose in education (Boyer, October 1979). In a speech on curriculum issues he stated,

Today all we have left in common is our differences. We make no pretense.

Today we have no social vision which is widely shared. And I don't need to tell this audience that on many campuses required courses have been dropped, and the ones which remain reveal a staggering incoherence of purpose, often expressed in



something we call distribution requirements. (Boyer, n.d., *Looking at the Curriculum*, p. 4)

Research conducted by the Carnegie Foundation during the 1980s found that the distribution requirement was unsatisfying to faculty and students (Boyer, November 1986). Boyer was concerned about the state of curriculum and the lack of space it allowed for students to ask universal questions or to develop the art of wise decision-making (Boyer, January 1982a). He advocated for a process in the classroom in which wrestling with big issues and complex values was completely legitimate, where the importance was not placed on the conclusions but upon the quest (Boyer, January 1982a). The college years were a time when students are faced with the biggest questions yet academic programs rarely met those issues head on (Boyer, February 1980). One solution was to bring the humanities to the center of the education stage and focus curriculum on common experiences and the connectedness of things (Boyer, 1982). Boyer promoted a curriculum where the disciplines explored larger, more integrated ends, where they went beyond the facts to help students see patterns, discover connections and gain an authentic view of life (Boyer, December 1988). Instead of a free-for-all in electives with the distribution system, the focus in a Boyer envisioned general education would focus on common goals that draws on wisdom from the past, organizes knowledge for the present and focuses on what we can do differently in the future (Boyer, November 1974).

**Civic engagement.** Boyer stressed that civic engagement should be a major component of educational goals and curriculum. He suggested that students be required to perform public services in their community as part of the curriculum. This would help them be aware of moral and ethical values without drawing religious lines (Lytle, 1984).

Boyer argued that this nation began under the conviction that in order for democracy to work, education was essential. Civic understanding belongs to all subjects and can be conveyed through literature, history, physics, engineering and many more (Boyer, February 1983). Higher education has the responsibility to prepare students to make informed decisions and judgments on issues and questions that will affect our future (Boyer, February 1983). Colleges and universities are not only a service to the nation but they also should act as centers of criticism, social protest and dissent that is unique and must be protected (Boyer, February 1983). Boyer described the goal of civic engagement perfectly when he said:

The aim is not only to prepare the young for productive careers, but to enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose, not only to generate new knowledge, but to channel knowledge to humane ends; not merely to increase participation at the polls, but to help shape a citizenry that can weigh decisions wisely and more effectively promote the public good. (Boyer, 1981, p. 11)

This quote shows Boyer's development in civic engagement from the time he wrote his essay on civics in Professor Mulholland's class to his time with the Carnegie Foundation.

### **Six Themes for Learning**

In conjunction with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Boyer extensively researched learning across the nation in order to produce a document that might help educators better understand this vision of general education. As a result of their research, Boyer and the Foundation recommended six themes presented in the book *A Quest for Common Learning*. Boyer promoted these themes in front of many higher education audiences throughout the country through his writings and speeches. They also

bring many of Boyer's convictions and conclusions together in a concise manner. If anyone in higher education had asked Boyer for a list of items that should be encompassed in general education courses and outcomes, he would have shown them these six themes: the centrality of language; understanding that we are all born, live and die into institutions; the idea that all life forms are interlocked through the interdependent nature of the universe; producing and consuming; common heritage and exploration of values and beliefs (Boyer, 1981).

Language, or the use of symbols, separates all human beings from other forms of life (Boyer, 1981). The use of symbols includes reading, writing, making meaning and understanding the evolution of language and nonverbals (e.g., music, dance, visual arts) (Boyer, January 1982b). Symbols encompass our most essential and basic human function, allowing us to give meaning to feelings, ideas and define our humanity to others. Part of the centrality of language is learning how to listen well (Boyer, March 1987). All of us are engaged with sending and receiving messages which creates this centrality of language. Language helps us connect to culture and becomes a tool for other learning, thus forming a kind of basic of the basics (Boyer, February 1980). Students from an early age must learn to read with understanding, write with clarity and effectively speak and listen (Boyer, June 1982). Throughout all of Boyer's schooling, personal and professional life, language was an essential component of education; what began with his first day of school with Miss Rice would carry out through his career at the Carnegie Foundation. His pursuit of language and the in-depth study of it affected his work on general education. Boyer would want every student today to become a

competent communicator as a way of expressing themselves and connecting to the rest of the human race.

The second theme incorporates understanding that we are all born, live and die into institutions (Boyer, 1981). We as humans are all members of these groups and institutions, and therefore, we must know and understand their origins, how they work and their interactions (Boyer, January 1982b).

The third theme says that students should learn about their connections to the natural world and ecology of the planet. In reality, all forms of life are interlocked, yet we often ignore these patterns in our curriculum (Boyer, March 1987). We all have a relationship with nature that can be explored through learning. This includes applications of science and how scientific discoveries led to inventions and technologies that involve benefits and risks (Boyer, February 1982). The human relationship with nature is often neglected in general education science requirements, yet Boyer understood that we cannot lose the larger view of science (Boyer, June 1982). By having a better understanding of our relationship with nature, we can also fully embrace our responsibility as human beings for the nature around us and the planet on which we live (Boyer, January 1982b).

The fourth theme is studying the ways of producing and consuming, which help students understand how work shapes the lives of individuals and how it reflects the social climate of culture (Boyer, February 1982). Students should examine producing, consuming and work patterns and through this process understand how they are dependent on one another (Boyer, 1981). We all work and depend on the work of others, and education is a blend of inspiration and utility. For many, work is an expression of

who we are and where we fit within society and the world (Boyer, 1981 September). Again, this shows our interdependency and how we are all connected to each other.

The fifth theme states that students must be introduced to our common heritage, to the events, people, great ideas and literature that have shaped our lives and nation. They should be adequately prepared to understand their connection to the past and their connectedness to today (Boyer, February 1980). It is important for students to make connections with their heritage and culture and to see themselves in time and space. This can be done through the exploration of our common history (Boyer, March 1987). Ultimately this theme relates back to our interdependency as this common heritage is the bridge holding us together (Boyer, 1981).

The sixth and final theme states that by exploring values in education, we can equip and encourage students to make responsible judgments, form convictions and act boldly on the values they hold (Boyer, January 1982a). Universities must be more than a place where we build practical skills and techniques. They must be places where we can explore the values that make man (Boyer, R006-005). This values search does not have to mean an indoctrination of the spirit or blurring of the separation of church and state, but can be found in literature, history, public policy and many other subjects (Boyer, January 1982a). Boyer sensed a growing awareness of the need to link education to purpose and meaning. He believed that an educated man is a man of values, who has a firm understanding and clear notion about life—what is good in society and what it is we still need to change (Boyer, R006-005). Ultimately, education and the purposes of life are inextricably related.

### **Boyer's Solutions**

Boyer provided, along with his themes, goals and purposes, some tangible and intangible solutions for colleges and universities to consider when reworking and revitalizing their general education program. Boyer was an advocate of the common core and encouraged higher education institutions to implement this idea. The common core would exist, not as a rigid set of courses, but as an idea or basic assumption focusing on the experiences common to all people for the purpose of broadening perspectives and connecting disciplines (Boyer, November 1986). This concept encompasses many of the themes that emerged from Boyer's published and unpublished works.

Boyer also suggested that educators close the gap between general and specialized education. Too often they existed as competing camps. Boyer suggested that education should ask students to put their specialty into a larger context and find ways for them to relate their major to general education courses (Boyer, November 1986). One way to accomplish this suggestion is through what Boyer called the enriched major. Here students would pursue some aspect of general education through their actual major (Boyer, November 1986). Boyer believed that general education courses can be shaped within the framework of the common traditions of aesthetics, heritage, institutions, ecology, work and living by values and beliefs. Disciplines should serve as a means to explore these integrative themes. This exploration could even move beyond the classroom into special lectures and seminars (Boyer, November 1986).

In addition, Boyer recommended decreasing the distribution requirement as a way to bring more coherence to general education. Instead, he suggested developing career-directed programs in a liberal arts context as an alternative to blend fundamental

competencies with career oriented lessons (Boyer, 1987). Courses on the meaning of vocation would also help students understand themselves and how they are connected to their contemporary world (Boyer, February 1980).

Ultimately, Boyer believed that the best solution for the general education slump was to unite the entire university community. Boyer firmly advocated that the entire university community needed to agree upon the essentialness of general education courses and help shape that common goal. Without common purpose, goals and agreement the fight for general education would only be an uphill battle (Boyer, January 1982b). People would often wonder and ask Boyer if it was possible to translate these themes into practice. He usually responded with the simple fact that many would say no. Students are too different, study fields have become too extensive and the current academic structure is too complex to permit this kind of cohesion. Yet, Boyer insisted that each college should work out this question for itself, to agree on the goals of general education and work out details according to their unique campus situation (Boyer, February 1982).

### **Summary**

The themes and subthemes that emerged as a result of this research outlines in detail the vision described in the literature produced by Boyer through the Carnegie Foundation. We can see starting from a young age and continuing through his college years, Boyer's experiences influenced the formation of his writing, speaking and ultimately his work in general education. The major themes of his published and unpublished works included coherence, two goals for education and six themes for learning and were the essential components of Boyer's vision for general education.

Areas of history, vocationalism, faculty, connectedness, curriculum and civic engagement were specific components encompassed by these themes. For Boyer, these themes and elements were the foundation of general education that he used to create his solutions for what he considered to be a general education crisis in institutions of higher learning. The common core, integrative themes, decrease of the distribution requirement and the unity of the entire university were specific solutions that Boyer offered to institutions who were looking to bring purpose and cohesiveness to their general education programs.



## Chapter 5

### Discussion

#### **Application for Today**

Ernest Boyer's vision for general education provides several areas of application for educators at colleges and universities today. The following recommendations are inspired by Boyer's passion for this important element of higher education and are offered as potential solutions for those seeking to strengthen general education's place in the modern academe.

The most important application for higher education today would be to stay true to the mission, vision and purpose of the liberal arts tradition that is so embedded in the undergraduate experience. Educators and professionals must revitalize general education courses until their purposes match the responsibility of the institution to the development of students and their preparation to be leaders in our world and society. The liberal arts and general education traditions have one of the greatest purposes: to provide a coherent system of education that combines values with learning in order to create fully educated young men and women. We must renew this commitment with energy and zeal in order to rightfully claim the title of "a liberal arts institution."

There is no one more pertinent to this conversation than Ernest Boyer. His vision and passion for general education is unmatched. There are many lessons we can take from Ernest Boyer as he was an advocate for many issues. But his overall goal is very

evident through his life and his works; he wanted the university to be great. He wanted it to be a center of criticism, enlightenment, growth and development. General education is one of the critical areas that Boyer felt needed significant improvement for America's colleges and universities. As educators consider general education, they should reflect on Boyer's vision and find ways to implement his themes and solutions according to the specific needs of each institution.

Difficult problems require unique solutions. Colleges and universities must think creatively about their general education problem in order to discover new and innovative solutions. As Boyer said, "creative solutions often follow when the right problems have been found" (Boyer, January 1981). Perhaps it is fear, lack of creativity or some other factor that has restricted colleges and universities from using creative solutions. Yet it is that kind of ingenuity that will solve our curriculum problems. Educators should embrace creativity especially within the general education curriculum. For example, integrating two courses from completely different disciplines could result in an enriching educational experience for both faculty and students.

The last recommendation is one that extends to faculty, administrators and anyone who has influence over or concern for general education. Institutions reviewing their general education offerings should consider recreating Boyer's vision and purpose, as programs are being revisited, revamped and restructured. Administrators and faculty alike should ask the following questions: What is the core of common learning? How can the goals of professional and liberal education be effectively combined (Boyer, January 1981)? Is this college's general education program coherent and well-planned (Boyer, n.d., *Challenge of Quality*)? These were questions posed in numerous speeches given by

Boyer to help educators process the current state of general education on their campuses and begin to think through creative solutions using his general education vision. My hope is that this vision and these questions may be helpful for faculty committees, student development professionals, administrators and executives to once again believe in and fight for general education in today's higher education institutions.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of this research is the breadth of information and work done on general education by Ernest Boyer. This research was only able to examine a small percentage of his writings and speeches that addressed general education. Therefore, this research reflects only those sources included in this analysis rather than an exhaustive analysis of the totality of Boyer's work.

Another limitation is the proximity of time in which these sources were produced to when they were analyzed. A historiography often changes over time. The analysis can shift as the person or situation becomes farther removed. Perhaps in some ways this analysis of Boyer's general education vision is too soon and has not had adequate time to foster and grow in today's higher education institutions. The effects of this vision have yet to be seen at many colleges and universities today.

One final limitation is in regards to the current state of general education. This research does not specifically look at current general education programs or best practices. All of the data used was part of Boyer's generation. While this helps create an excellent picture of Boyer's environment, it does not include a complete analysis of the current state of general education.

### **Further Research**

The possibilities for further research on Ernest Boyer are numerous. Faculty engagement and scholarship, campus community and civic engagement are other major areas of Boyer's professional work that need to be highlighted. Another area of focus could be the connection between K-12 schools and higher education. Boyer worked extensively on this relationship and it would be interesting to see research provide an application for development and implementation of this relationship for schools today. A study could also be done that analyzes current general education systems in correlation with Boyer's vision. Currently nothing exists in the way of a biography or any sort of collection of information and stories from Boyer's personal and professional life. This would be a wonderful resource and inspiration to many higher education professionals today.

### **Conclusion**

Various forms of the core curriculum, from the classical curriculum of colonial America to the general education system we know today, have traditionally been an integral part of the college experience. For generations, undergraduate students have received this breadth of knowledge in a variety of fields and disciplines in order to make developed, well-rounded men and women of society. In more recent years, general education has experienced some tumultuous times with a lack of vitality, purpose and cohesiveness. Ernest Boyer emerged as an advocate for revisiting and revitalizing general education on college campuses where it seemed to have suffered. Through his work as President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Boyer cast a vision for general education which encompassed a curriculum guided by

interdependency, civic engagement for the common good and the importance of faculty throughout the educational experience.

Studying those who have gone before us provides the opportunity to learn from their lives and work. This historiography on the life of Ernest Boyer allows current and future higher education professionals to see what impacted his passion and vision for general education. By analyzing Boyer's life experiences along with published and unpublished resources we get a glimpse of who Ernest Boyer really was and what within his mind and heart drove the passion and vision he had for general education. The themes of coherence, two goals for education and six themes for learning were the foundation of all the general education publications produced by Boyer and the Carnegie Foundation. These are the elements of Boyer's vision that should inform educators today.

If Ernest Boyer were with us now, he would charge each university to look deeply at their institution. He would recommend that each liberal arts institution renew the importance of a coherent, well-planned and purposeful general education program. He would offer a few solutions, but would encourage each institution to discover on its own the solution that works best for their current context, uniting the entire campus around common goals and purpose. Every liberal arts college can learn from the life and mind of Ernest L. Boyer, taking one or many elements of his vision for general education and applying it to holistically develop students into knowledgeable members of our society and world.

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