The General Education Project: The Second Phase
August 2007 – 2010

The First Phase: 2003-2007
CUNY’s General Education Project began in February 2003 as an experimental effort, initiated within the University’s Central Office. During that first semester, participants began meeting regularly to explore our understandings and practices of “general/liberal” education—to make visible the ground on which we were standing, the landscapes that shaped each college’s General Education efforts.

We proceeded anthropologically, like field researchers examining the terrain: we looked at a set of questions from several angles, and scrutinized the practices and promises of Gen Ed at our colleges and across the University. Our Project represented multiple perspectives, and included participants from community, senior, and comprehensive colleges. In the first semester, the participants came from neighboring colleges in two boroughs: Bronx Community College, LaGuardia Community College, Lehman College, New York City College of Technology, Queensborough Community College, and Queens College; by September 2004, the Project included representatives from all of the colleges. Throughout, the participants have been faculty and administrators who represent various scholarly disciplines and historical perspectives.

Out of our collaborations has come an annual conference: LaGuardia Community College, Queensborough Community College, and Queens College have each been host to the first three General Education conferences, and Baruch will host the fourth on May 2, 2008. In 2006, we began to connect our work in General Education to our efforts within the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) Institutional Leadership Program; these are complementary efforts, as both seek to refocus academia on teaching and learning. Most recently, more than 20 CUNY faculty and administrators published a collection of essays: Reclaiming the Public University: Conversations on General & Liberal Education.

Have we found – or created – common ground? As a leader of this Project, I would argue that we have found, in some cases, the “abandoned lot” of higher education—not only at some of our own colleges, but at institutions across the country. When we count the required credits of each degree, we can say that for most students, Gen Ed is their largest—but unacknowledged—“major.” In most cases, students take one disconnected course after another; General Education is not a department or a program, has little to no infrastructure, is not the domain of a Chair or Dean. Most introductory courses that fulfill General Education requirements are taught by part-time faculty. At CUNY, this is changing: we know what can be done with abandoned lots in this vast city: we can let out the land to developers; we can, perhaps, with the right leadership, build a common garden. Our Project has taken and named this “lot” as a site that needs ongoing, focused attention and commitment by faculty and administrators, and as a terrain that needs to make sense to both students and faculty. This introductory note offers a description of the General Education “commons” and suggests a direction for what we need to do in the Second Phase of our General Education Project.
Mapping General Education Curricula: Paradigms

Part of our work in the first Phase of the General Education Project has been to discern how curricula are organized—to read, structurally, the variety of General Education programs extant within CUNY. In brief, here are three paradigms for General Education:

Organization by Knowledge or “Content”. General Education structures that are organized around knowledge/content fall into two subcategories:

   Core Curriculum: A set of courses required of all students, with an expectation that students will learn a shared body of knowledge or gain a shared cultural literacy. (See Brooklyn College.)

   Areas of Distribution: A “menu” of choices within categories typically drawn from divisional areas of knowledge and perspectives. (See Hunter College.)

Organization by Skills/Competencies/Critical Abilities. General Education structures that are organized around a set of skills, competencies, critical abilities, tools, or literacies that are distributed in critical courses, junctures (capstones) throughout the curriculum. (See Bronx Community College.)

Organization by knowledge and skills together. Increasingly, colleges are organizing General Education by weaving critical abilities into a core or areas of distribution or by reconceiving these as “ways of knowing,” which are intertwined with the development of particular abilities. (See Queens College.)

There may a fourth paradigm which is organized around the practice of Gen Ed rather than its content or the skills produced. For example, LaGuardia is moving toward institutionalizing ePortfolio throughout the college, a practice which promises to stimulate students’ metacognition and academic identity. Can we imagine General Education as a process—a method—of creating engaged thinkers, active learners, public students? What other “General Education practices” are, or might be, part of our repertoire?

Ten Critical Questions for Phase II:

How are the parts of Gen Ed connected: are there “outliers,” such as Freshman Composition, Math, or Foreign Languages, that are disconnected from the core, areas of distribution, or competencies?

Where is General Education? Where are General Education requirements visible for all to see?

Who is in charge? Does someone with authority and academic standing lead your Gen Ed Program?

How is revision undertaken? Who approves curriculum? Who leads faculty development?

Who teaches General Education?

How do you know Gen Ed is “working”? How do you know you’ve met your goals?

What do students say about General Education? How do you know?

How does General Education work for transfer students?

How are the administrative and academic dots connected? Would your college pass a “coherence test?”

What is the “imprint”—intended or unintended—left on students by General Education at your college?
In education, there is but one independent judge, the teacher, and the teacher should be answerable only to the students.

L. N. Tolstoy, “The School at Yasnaya Polyana”

This essay runs against the current. Today’s focus on the quality of a CUNY education is on ‘input’ criteria, on entrance requirements, on math, Regents, SAT scores. The focus of this essay will be different: on ‘output,’ on outcomes, and on the distinguishing traits of a quality CUNY undergraduate degree. Furthermore, it will suggest measuring the ‘output’ or results of Gen Ed without the benefit of statistics. (If they indeed are a benefit.)

Each college leaves an imprint, a unique trace on its graduates, and there is probably a common imprint that identifies a CUNY graduate, whether he or she receives an associate or baccalaureate degree. We speak of earlier alumni of CCNY or Hunter or Brooklyn as a “City graduate,” a “Hunter alum,” a “Brooklyn BA.” This process continues, of course, and the University’s colleges still leave an imprint on their graduates. The way in which our students learn and what they learn creates this imprint. The quality of the CUNY degree, its “value-added,” is something we all are struggling to assess and evaluate, both collectively and individually. Should we not define the nature or character of this imprint in order to assess the values it represents?

We are the CASTL project, and as members of the Carnegie Academy for SoTL, we do well to pay homage to the President of Carnegie, Lee Shulman, and to his ideas on teaching and learning. For this essay I would borrow his concept of “signature pedagogies” and transform it slightly into “educational signatures.”1 This metaphor seems to work particularly well when we discuss the imprint CUNY and its colleges leave on our students. What is the signature, or inscription left by the education we provide for our graduates? What do they learn and how to describe it? Of course, students today graduate with many signatures, as they swirl and transfer and learn in a number of colleges, oftentimes even simultaneously (but not at CUNY, I hope). Pushing the metaphor a bit further, the more valuable a document, the more signatures it bears.

A college’s signature seems to me a more suitable concept than the marketing metaphor of branding. (We at Lehman are working hard at branding.) Branding is not a pleasant

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metaphor to attach to a student’s experience. Cattle are branded; inanimate objects are branded. Brands declare possession, ownership; brands devalue or destroy individuality. Signatures are personal and individual, and signatories leave a slightly different imprint on each document. A brand is an unpleasant, de-individualizing, de-humanizing marker. The idea of a Lehman brand of education, alas, does not move me.

To me signatures suggest a contract: an agreement between or among parties. Applied to the distinguishing mark of an undergraduate education, the image suggests a contract between student and institution: what the college and CUNY have promised or produced that enhances the student’s life – internally, externally. The nature of that contract could well be described in terms of curriculum.

A college’s signature is formed of many parts, and that part most identifiable with a particular college is the general education experience. As Judith Summerfield has often noted, Gen Ed is the largest major, and as such it leaves the most characteristic imprint or inscription – or should do so.² Certainly disciplines have their own signatures, as do professional programs (in this sense a bit different from the “signature pedagogies” Shulman uses to define the rituals of graduate training). But it is the quality or emphases of the liberal education at each college which seem especially unique to that institution. The curricular part derives from a combination of competencies and literacies (e.g., skills of communication and expression, of quantitative reasoning and critical analysis), of perspectives and comprehension (e.g., historical, social, philosophical, artistic), and of applied experience and training (e.g., community-based learning, learning abroad, professional study). And there are extracurricular experiences as well. A college’s signature should unfold most distinctively in its general education goals and outcomes, for they are not discipline specific, but cross- or inter-disciplinary by nature.

A particular college’s pedagogical and programmatic emphases, or practices, mix with the local environment – the students, faculty, facilities – to produce a characteristic experience that is its signature. Signatures vary: bold, sweeping, light, unsteady, and they even vary for the signatory to some degree. What characteristic learning experiences does each college create in its Gen Ed program? What is the signature it aims to inscribe in the lives of its students?

The CUE Proposals submitted last spring provide a snapshot of undergraduate education at each college. These proposals describe what is happening in Gen Ed – sometimes by including this as a named feature of the proposal, sometimes as the whole sum of its parts. These proposals are works in progress: the picture of a workshop, but not in the usual sense that we use for our development activities. Rather, I think, these workshops are the Russian masterskaya or master’s room: the place where a master craftsman works and creates. This is where the developing ideas, values, practices that shape undergraduate education are made visible. They are at various stages of creation and refinement, they are administered with vastly different structures, and the settings and circumstances often offer striking contrasts (viz. a two- vs. four-year process). But the

² I will use “Gen Ed” as a formula for general education curriculum or program, and capitalize it because my spell checker prefers it this way.
proposals have in common their purpose to describe and propose activities, strategies, objectives and results: they may or may not include a separate description of Gen Ed, but they certainly provide rich material for discerning the special Gen Ed signature of each college.

Much of SoTL is making learning visible. The CUE Proposals make the programmatic, even institutional process of teaching and learning, of assisting and supporting learning, visible to all. Of course, the primary purpose of these documents is something else, and this administrative purpose can dull, if not deaden their impact as sources of shared knowledge. Therefore we CASTL fellows at CUNY have undertaken the task of turning these proposals into visible testimonies by treating them as a compendium of pedagogy and practice across the University.

With these thoughts, then, I have taken up the CUE Proposals for 2007-2008. The purpose of my readings of and reflections on these documents has been to attempt to understand the general education signature which distinguishes each college. This seems clearly to be a form of assessment, however un-statistical or lacking in scalable measures. It is intended as a first step in the discussion of the particular character and dominant traits of the Gen Ed programs across the University. And it is an invitation for subsequent steps to be undertaken by the individual colleges and those who create, shepherd, support their programs. The process means “going meta” in a way that we often urge on our students: formulate what intentions mark our own college Gen Ed program, and what traits distinguish students who complete it.

For many of us with institutional experience and memory going back the several years of our General Education Forum, you will sense a shift in emphasis. In the first years we struggled mightily with defining what constitutes Gen Ed across the University, and what were the common denominators and the shared means to an end. That was Phase I. This new phase looks to understand the different emphases at each campus, but with no less an emphasis on assessing how we are doing. Defining signatures represents a shift towards appreciating the individual features that are the strengths of various programs, especially in order to learn from sister-colleges what they have managed to do more effectively or efficiently than we have.

The first difficulty in approaching the 17 proposals is that they represent Gen Ed programs at various stages of development. (Never mind the fact that the actual proposals themselves report on their Gen Ed programs differently, with varying emphases and components, some emphatically, some tacitly.) This search for individual signatures will not produce information about which college is more or less advanced or successful, for this is not a quantitative reasoning exercise. The task, rather, is to identify, appreciate, recognize the varieties of educational experience.

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3 There are 17 available at http://www1.cuny.edu/academics/oaa/uei/cue/cueproposals-07-08.html. (The 18th is the Law School, which is not a part of this Gen Ed study.) All subsequent quotations from the texts of the various CUE Proposals are from this source. (There are two important undergraduate programs in the University that are not represented here: the Macaulay Honors College and the CUNY Online Baccalaureates.)
What sort of elements make up the signatures I’m looking for? Familiar elements: the abilities we all focus on – reading, writing, mathematical – and the pleiade of literacies: informational, quantitative, academic. There are the perspectives – temporal, spatial (as in the social sciences); artistic and humanistic (investing literature, music, art, languages, philosophy); and scientific (as in the bench sciences). And there are the applications of general education in practical, community-based internships through tutoring, field work and research, to name a few, as well as study abroad and work-study abroad. Many of these elements do not belong to Gen Ed alone, but are shared by major and minor programs, or in interdisciplinary capstone courses, for example. In sum, the elements are familiar and part of our common undertaking in general education. It is the mixture, the emphasis, the style and sequencing of these elements that create individual inscriptions marking a student’s experiences on one or another campus.

My reading of the proposals suggests three stages of Gen Ed signatures: a revising or redefining stage, a developing or implementing stage, and a fully functional or fine-tuning stage. The advantage of this developmental viewpoint is that it brings together colleges in unusual constellations. An unexpected result is that the stages do not correlate with distinctiveness: a program just beginning can envision a program with a more distinctive signature than a well developed program. Nonetheless, evolution is a useful organizer.

Without attempting to catalog or index all the signatures, let me touch on a few in order to suggest what I mean by this concept and why it can be a useful key to understanding Gen Ed in our University.

Hunter College, as the second most senior of all the CUNY colleges, presents a formidable challenge in discerning its Gen Ed signature. Hunter’s CUE Proposal gives prominent place to the Mellon Project on General Education, described as “a college-wide investigation and renewal of Hunter’s general education” now underway. The shaping of Gen Ed is at the “heart of Coordinated Undergraduate Education” at Hunter, and the CUE proposal itself defines many sharply focused programs. The first inklings of what this process will entail can be seen on the “in progress” Web page “The Mellon Initiative,” which describes goals and activities and provides a provocative reference resource.4 However, as they stand now, Hunter’s Gen Ed requirements are extremely complex, even daunting, witness the more than 25 pages of course titles listed as the requirements for the degree in the Hunter undergraduate catalog.5 A First Year Seminar, Transfer Student Week, and programs to develop writing and math skills constitute support for a successful Gen Ed profile, but the signature is not distinctive. The requirements (and the repeated emphasis on requirements) make the program seem ‘muscle bound’ – too powerful and paralyzed by strong, but competing forces. The results of the Mellon Project could resolve this stasis and should yield a clear signature for the Hunter undergraduate.

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4 [http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/mellonproject/inprogress/index.htm](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/mellonproject/inprogress/index.htm)
5 [http://registrar.hunter.cuny.edu/pdf_folders/undergraduate05_08catalog/academicprogramsandpolicies.pdf](http://registrar.hunter.cuny.edu/pdf_folders/undergraduate05_08catalog/academicprogramsandpolicies.pdf)
John Jay is also reconsidering its Gen Ed profile, and it seems a bit further along than its elder sister college. Counter-balancing a strong professional identity in criminal justice and public safety, the college has reached its third phase of a process to redefine and build up its Gen Ed program. Its CUE Proposal describes a series of programs to strengthen the non-professional, liberal arts side of undergraduate education. The college has already “engaged in a year and a half of community building around the topics of liberal studies and general education” in order to conduct “an assessment of John Jay’s own General Education requirements, first passed in 1975 and last revised in 1989.” A General Education Task Force is now charged to “address the educational needs of John Jay students and the goals of the college, and connect them to the principles of effective General Education” with the goal of presenting curriculum options to the college community, which is also engaged in developing new liberal arts majors. Its CUE Proposal describes a process of strengthening math, science and communication skills, reflecting the needs of CUNY students generally. What strikes me as distinctive in the proposal is a program of “Connecting Classroom to Community” to increase service learning in the Gen Ed curriculum. The signature of a John Jay undergraduate education seems to be developing along strong community service lines, borrowing this strength which is already established in the college’s professional identity. It promises to become a distinctive Gen Ed signature, whose liberal education objectives include community service experience.

A similar emphasis on the community and on in-service learning can be found in the developing Gen Ed identity of Medgar Evers College. As described in its CUE Proposal, “the Community-Based Learning (CBL) Program includes the American Democracy Project (ADP), Political Engagement Project (PEP), and Student Leadership Program (SLP),” and the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence also supports “community-based learning through service learning programs, community based research and collaborations with community-based educational programs.” Although the Core Curriculum at Medgar Evers is undergoing revision, clearly the signature of the college for its graduates will be a community-based liberal education. The CUE Proposal describes the college’s vision and goals in terms of its students becoming “change-agents in the community.”

Like John Jay, Baruch is also engaged in a balancing (or counter-balancing) act. Baruch’s strong professional emphasis on business dominates the overall imprint of the college, even overwhelming the Gen Ed program. Interestingly, a full core curriculum is displayed in the Zicklin School of Business Web site, but not in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences. (The Baruch College Common Core Curriculum can be found in the college catalog.) Baruch’s CUE Proposal describes a completed process to “establish learning goals for general education,” which “bedrock goals” are “improved communication skills (written and oral) and quantitative skills.” Not unique objectives, as the proposal points out, but nonetheless a signal emphasis on liberal education in the college’s strong professional context. Emphasis on these two skills dominates its CUE Proposal. Perhaps the need to balance professional preparation with liberal education

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6 http://zicklin.baruch.cuny.edu/programs/undergrad/core.html  
objectives, of the sort achieved in Gen Ed coursework, represents the special signature of Baruch’s undergraduate programs. An article by former dean Martin Stevens on “Liberal Arts and Career Education at Baruch” – prominently displayed on the college Web site – presents this balance as an ideal of the college. The Gen Ed signature of Baruch embodies this dual objective of liberal education and professional, business training.

The Gen Ed programs at CUNY’s two-year colleges seem better developed and with clearer signatures than those of many four-year colleges. The irony here is that general education for the associate degree serves students who will continue in a senior college: this first signature may prove more durable and distinctive than those acquired subsequently. Even two-year colleges which are redesigning and developing new Gen Ed programs describe in their CUE Proposals distinctive signatures with remarkable clarity. Bronx Community College has established its Gen Ed goals and proficiencies for the entire college and is now involved in syllabus-revision in the departments. What seems distinctive in the CUE Proposal is the decision to infuse “liberal learning” in all courses, and to begin with a specific set of three core courses in which to introduce key Gen Ed objectives. The process is eminently practical: the Gen Ed Web page for BCC publishes two booklets with exercises and activities in support of specific competencies. Its Gen Ed objectives describe the specific signature BCC intends for its graduates: “well-informed, globally aware, engaged world citizens making a meaningful contribution to society, … self-directed, committed to their physical and mental well-being, and to lifelong learning.”

Kingsborough, likewise as a result of reforming and redefining what constitutes its Gen Ed program, offers both goals and implementations. Gen Ed is the first of several priority initiatives described in KCC’s CUE Proposal. However, perhaps because a General Education Report was imminent, the Proposal does not present a Gen Ed program per se. The emphasis on reading and writing in the Proposal (“essential to a quality general education”) and on faculty development, viz. preparation of faculty through online WAC certification, highlight KCC’s plan. The college Web site provides a distinctive Gen Ed philosophy. Here the general outlines of a signature liberal education emerge: the graduate will “learn the fundamental elements of the social, behavioral, physical and life sciences; the humanities and the arts as the expression of our individual uniqueness and shared experiences; mathematical reasoning; and written, interpersonal and technological communication for a changing and global society; and apply what is learned to solving real-world problems.” The emphasis on communication carries over as a signature trait in the college’s CUE proposal.

Queensborough’s CUE Proposal provides a number of unique facets in Gen Ed, largely the results of work by the college’s General Education Inquiry Group. A strong signature of an “integrated educational experience” emerges from among the details of the college’s Proposal. Specifically, the primary goal of CUE is “to bring together e-Portfolio with the other elements that will define the academy experience, including an

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8 http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/wsas/essay/stevens/stevens.html
9 http://www.bcc.cuny.edu/banners/general-education/
10 http://www.kingsborough.edu/faculty/gened/philosophy.htm
emphasis on discipline-specific learning and critical thinking skills and opportunities to present academic work in professional venues prior to graduation.” To the metaphor of the capstone, QCC has added cornerstone and milestone projects which aim “to build both depth and connections within and among courses, and within curricula, and to insure concrete opportunities for students to achieve those General Education objectives associated with higher level learning, particularly analysis and synthesis.” The Gen Ed signature at QCC, then, would appear to be an integrated, seamless educational experience where liberal education finds practical experience and expression.

Two senior colleges, likewise at a stage of implementing new general education curricular plans, suggest strikingly different signatures. Both Queens and Brooklyn have recently accomplished monumental curricular reforms, and both now find themselves creating courses like shoemakers fitting quality leather to new lasts. Brooklyn’s CUE Proposal describes a set of General Education Initiatives which include learning communities, WAC, developing quantitative reasoning skills, and assessment based on core goals. The objectives of this initiative are “to increase student engagement, improve communication and coordination among faculty, help students integrate and synthesize learning across the boundaries of individual courses, strengthen students’ critical thinking skills, strengthen students’ writing and other communication skills, strengthen quantitative reasoning, and improve student persistence and success. Ongoing assessment as a means of self-reflection and self-improvement will be an integral part of each of these efforts.” The Proposal’s listing of goals suggest the extraordinary breadth and variety of programs at Brooklyn and the great resources devoted to undergraduate education. The distinctive character of this general education is difficult to discern, however, within this cornucopia of ongoing and projected efforts. Perhaps the distinguishing nature of a Brooklyn liberal education will be shaped by the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Initiative (STEM), described in the CUE Proposal. Perhaps other traits, like the “Core Abroad” or e-Portfolios, will provide a special quality for undergraduate education at Brooklyn. The new Core goals, listed on the Brooklyn Web site, do not clarify the question of distinctive emphases: keyed to types of courses, they do not make a coherent impression. The Core Curriculum site is a marvel of explicitness and detail, particularly as you drill down into specific courses and syllabi – models of the best practices, it seems to me.11 But the overall impact of this Core is not clear: what is the distinctive signature that a Brooklyn undergraduate education inscribes on its graduates? (Or perhaps, quite possibly, I have not been looking in the right places.)

Queens College finds itself at a similar stage of providing courses to fit a newly minted general education structure, christened the PLAS – Perspectives in the Liberal Arts and Sciences. The Queens CUE Proposal notes at the outset that “the successful integration of the College’s new general education curriculum is a major goal of the College.” In a rather unusual role for such a program, the college Center for Teaching and Learning has become the principal manager of course development for the PLAS, and as such it occupies a central strategic role in the CUE plans. WAC at Queens plays a major role, together with the CTL. A document titled “Goals for Student Writing,” endorsed by the Queens Senate, states that “a Queens College education aims to enable students to take

11 http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/portal/core/goals.html
ownership of language and to develop a capacity for both critical analysis and considered reflection” – a signature in its own right. The fullest statement of the signature qualities of a Queens undergraduate education, however, is found in the Final Report of the President’s Task Force on General Education, one of the clearest formal presentations of any CUNY effort to state the objectives of an undergraduate liberal education.12 (Not surprisingly several of the Task Force members are alumni of the CUNY General Education Forum!) Here is a statement that seems to define the Queens general education signature: “The goal of a Queens College liberal education is to equip its graduates with the intellectual abilities to negotiate an ever-changing world of information and knowledge and understand a complex, changing world and act in it as citizens of the city, state, nation and world. The heart of a Queens College education, then, lies in a set of critical abilities that permeates all aspects of the curriculum and characterizes an educated citizen.” The emphasis, it seems, is on understanding, analysis, and responsible action – something of a Renaissance competence married to participatory democracy. The Report continues and elaborates on how this might be achieved in course work and other forms of study and general education.

Finally, we come to fully implemented Gen Ed programs which have had the benefit of relatively extensive experience. Of these, perhaps LaGuardia Community College presents the most distinctive Gen Ed signature: the extensively developed ePortfolio (which we have seen presented on several occasions, including CUNY CASTL Seminars) provides a virtual, almost physical inscription that is part of the student’s educational and learning identity. It occupies a significant portion of LaGuardia’s CUE Proposal, where it is credited with assisting students in “synthesizing ideas, writing, working effectively with others, and making judgments about the soundness of information, arguments or methods.” The Proposal likewise stresses developing Gen Ed core competencies (“Writing in the Disciplines, Building Information Literacy in the Disciplines, Critical Thinking across the Curriculum, Oral Skills across the Curriculum”) and emphasizes the breadth and cross-disciplinary universality of its goals for liberal arts and sciences programs. (See their “Graduate Requirements” for Liberal Arts and Sciences, which – remarkably – are not a list of courses, but a set of eleven goals to be achieved.13) The ePortfolio provides the format for a signature, which in addition to the Gen Ed goals represents specific qualities such as “going meta” and “interacting with texts and ideas.” Notable, in view of the CASTL origins of this essay, are LaGuardia’s SoTL support for faculty and the activities described in the publication In Transit. The ePortfolio, no longer unique to LaGuardia’s Gen Ed, and confirmed as effective by the several imitators throughout CUNY, has a singular significance for LaGuardia’s distinctive profile and makes the individual student’s knowledge visible – a signature in visible, virtual ink!

Another college with a remarkably clear signature is Hostos, although its format is less distinctive than LaGuardia’s. The college’s CUE Proposal strikes me as one of the most clearly data-driven, and describes a program of remarkable comprehensiveness. Hostos has taken Gen Ed to encompass the entire life of the student, even beyond what are usual student concerns, and far beyond the traditional classroom. This distinctively broad,

13 http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/liberalarts/graduation_requirement.htm
pervasive reach permeates the CUE Proposal which describes programs such as Book of the Semester, Freshman Academy, the frontloading of college-readiness skills, student self-assessment with Web tools and Web-based mapping of Gen Ed progress, global citizenship, and academic conferences. I should add Hostos’ delightful program (not mentioned in CUE): the Committee on Beautiful Ideas (COBI). The signature of Gen Ed at Hostos is access made real and actual by extending the reach of the college even into the family. Academic life and literacy are actualized for students who are among the least likely to succeed and the least prepared in CUNY. The thoroughly attentive, intimate academic environment of the college is essential to this signature. Personally, I might add from my own experiences on the Hostos campus, you can sense a special mood when you enter college buildings and meet faculty and students: however difficult to define, it is a palpable signature of discovery and academic learning as a new, total experience.

Finally, since Lehman is entering the sixth year of its “new” Gen Ed curriculum, and since I know this campus best of all, I should attempt to define our signature and the college. This is not easy, since we have not thought much in these terms: we have concentrated on developing courses and then on developing the faculty to teach them. Exactly what imprint this learning leaves on our students has not been our focus (as it has not been on many campuses, I expect). Forced to look in a mirror, I would define our Gen Ed signature as liberal education that dominates the student’s early career, and then continues as a context for the concentrations – major and minor – of juniors and seniors. Our students emerge with the practical, career, professional goals that they came in with, further developed and closer to realization to be sure, but tempered, even moderated and enlarged by a traditional liberal education. The LEH courses, first as a freshman seminar on the liberal arts and finally as the required LEH300-301 multi-disciplinary courses, provide skills first, then perspective and context. Lehman’s signature seems to comprise specialization (often professional) enhanced by refractions through the values of the liberal arts and sciences. Students encounter these new prisms of understanding as freshmen, polish them in skills and distribution courses, and finally utilize them in multi-disciplinary, topical or controversy-centered courses that apply skills and perspectives to contemporary issues. Lehman’s signature would be a student both competent and aware, focused and yet with peripheral understanding, and particularly experienced in independent, self-directed education (through intensive online, distance learning) as a basis for life-long learning beyond the classroom.

I’ll stop here, hoping that I’ve made my point. But I have left much unsaid, and several Gen Ed signatures remain to be discussed. They include perhaps the most mature of all CUNY Gen Ed programs, the well developed, highly inflected general education structure at the College of Staten Island. Especially distinctive is CSI’s “successful freshman learning communities program (FIRST) and new initiatives that have evolved from FIRST: the Verrazano School and ‘Math Focus’.” I remember how several years ago at a CUNY Gen Ed Forum CSI presented a fully operational program, complete with brochure. But I confess, however, that in the complex of goals and assessments, I miss the image of a distinctive signature. The Gen Ed program at BMCC is likewise well developed and complete with a “General Education Student Guide” to
help students map seven specific Gen Ed “outcome goals.” The integration of skills yields a panoply of acronyms – WAC, RAC, MAC and ESLAC – which describe a highly coordinated emphasis on passing the CPE. But, from my limited CUE Proposal perspective, a distinctive signature seems yet to emerge here.

I have not mentioned City Tech, whose Gen Ed program balances the technologies and liberal arts, much as Baruch and John Jay are balancing professional and liberal education. The integration of Gen Ed into all programs aims to set students on “a pathway that is initially broad, but as graduation nears becomes more specifically focused.” This should result from a process of designing “goals for general education at Tech that moves both horizontally and vertically,” meaning within disciplines and across the curriculum. Support from a NEH grant is assisting the process of “re-imagining” Gen Ed, but the imprint of the program is still developing. York College’s Success to the Third Power (S³) “enhances academic readiness through Gen Ed course modules and attached workshops that develop reading, writing, and mathematics capability.” York’s innovative jump-starting of Gen Ed content courses in the developmental curriculum is combined with “Gen Ed modules” which will be “thematically aligned to ‘Today Jamaica: Tomorrow, the World,’ York’s new community-based learning initiative for first-year students.” The emerging signature of community-oriented Gen Ed education suggests similarities to Medgar Evers and John Jay. Finally, I must mention City College, if only to draw attention to FIQWS (sounds like ficus), the Freshman Inquiry Writing Seminars, six-credit, team-taught, subject-based, writing intensive workshops. The effect of immersing students immediately in an intensive college-level experience could radically shape City’s Gen Ed objectives, which include traditional proficiencies and perspectives, uniquely defined in three stages: before 45 credits, before 60, and above.

This brief, idiosyncratic tour of the Gen Ed signatures of CUNY colleges raises a number of questions, the most interesting of which is whether there is a CUNY signature – what one member of our Bridging the Colleges Seminar called “CUNY-ness.” I’m tempted to suggest that a whole University signature is greater than the sum of its parts, but this begs the question: what is distinctive about CUNY Gen Ed? Part of the answer lies with the nature of CUNY students themselves – urban, engaged in multiple pursuits in addition to college, multi-lingual and often foreign born, often the first to complete college in their immediate circle, often achieving a college education at great personal cost and sacrifice. The CUNY graduate rarely has a campus life in the sense of after-hours dorm living, and therefore learning is dominated by classroom and other curricular activities. This probably makes the educational, formal learning experience the chief marker of what it means to be a CUNY college student. The value added by CUNY can be quite different than that added by college experienced on a residence campus. How best to define that value? The signature of a CUNY education, described as an institutional objective, can be found in the Forward and Prefatory Note to our recent Reclaiming the Public University: 14 Chancellor Goldstein and Executive Vice Chancellor and University

14 Judith Summerfield and Crystal Benedicks, eds., Reclaiming the Public University: Conversations on General & Liberal Education. Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2007.
Provost Botman have set forth succinct descriptions of what undergraduate education should be in general. But the devil, as ever, is in the details.

The question of a Gen Ed signature is a question of defining outcomes: what is the goal of the Gen Ed program at each campus? It eludes statistical assessment for it is not something that can be quantified scientifically. Not all evaluation submits to a measuring stick. To assess the nature and value of educational programs means understanding what the learner gains: what are the inscriptions made by this phase of learning on the life of the student? Even if it is difficult to define and even more difficult to agree on a definition, the process of weighing and assessing the emphases and values that we wish to impart is a worthwhile exercise. It is “going meta” on a college and University level.

Finally, a word on the true nature of educational assessment. The following observation by Leo Tolstoy, from which I have taken my epigraph, seems especially compelling today, almost a century and a half after it was written:

> If an outsider wants to evaluate our knowledge, let him or her live with us awhile so that he or she can see the results of our knowledge, and its applications to life. This is the only way, and all efforts to hold examinations are only a deception, a lie, and an obstacle to learning. In education, there is but one independent judge, the teacher, and the teacher should be answerable only to the students.15

My view of evaluating Gen Ed programs and the metaphor of signatures represent a personal, faculty perspective (as distinct from an institutional, administrative report). In my decades of teaching at Lehman, perhaps I have come to “live with” our students in some ways. What we teach collectively, and what our students learn ultimately, has never been easy to define. But we should at least try to understand better what we intend to give our students, and how what we give is distinctive. This is why the metaphor of a signature seems useful. It is a lasting imprint, however faded or joined with other signatures over time. It is our mark signifying that we are answerable above all to our students.

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15 This is quoted from a collection edited by our colleague at Kingsborough, Robert Blaisdell, *Tolstoy As Teacher: Leo Tolstoy’s Writings on Education* (NY: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2000), p. 129.