

Study on the Characteristics of the General Education Curriculum at the National Southwest Associated University

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Abstract: The implementation of general education was one of the key factors contributing to the success of talent cultivation at the National Southwest Associated University (NSAU). Strongly influenced by the American model, NSAU developed a curriculum system that integrated institution-wide compulsory courses, major-specific required courses, and electives, all within a credit-based framework. The university emphasized practical skill development by offering laboratory and internship courses despite wartime constraints. The instructional model of "one course, multiple instructors" enabled the effective integration of faculty expertise and encouraged students' independent thinking. In practice, NSAU maintained strict academic standards, ensured the provision of instructional and experimental resources, and actively engaged in external collaborations, all of which significantly enhanced its ability to foster broadly educated individuals.

Keywords: National Southwest Associated University, General Education, Curriculum Design, Educational Practice.

1. Introduction

Under the extremely challenging circumstances of the War of Resistance Against Japan, the National Southwest Associated University (NSAU) succeeded in cultivating a large number of outstanding talents. The reasons for its success are manifold, among which its emphasis on educating well-rounded generalists stands out as a core factor. NSAU's educational philosophy was deeply rooted in the ideal of "cultivating generalists," a commitment that was clearly reflected in its curricular design. The university established a hybrid structure that integrated common compulsory courses, major-specific required courses, and elective courses, thereby achieving a dynamic balance between breadth and depth-between general and specialized education. This system was further supported by a rigorous credit-based framework, which embodied the principles of "strict admission and stringent graduation standards" as well as the practice of "individualized instruction according to student aptitude."

The merger of three leading institutions-Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Nankai University-not only enhanced NSAU's academic resilience but also brought together an exceptional pool of faculty for the implementation of general education. The innovative instructional approach known as "one course, multiple instructors" (*yi ke duo shi*) allowed for a stratified yet collaborative model of teaching, wherein renowned scholars, professors, lecturers, and teaching assistants co-taught in a coordinated manner. This multi-layered structure created an intellectually rich and pedagogically diverse classroom ecosystem, conducive to the cultivation of the "whole person."

Equally important was NSAU's strong emphasis on developing students' practical and hands-on abilities. Even under wartime constraints, the university actively promoted a "learning by doing" model of education. Through practice-oriented teaching and experiential learning, students were trained not only in theoretical knowledge but also in real-world problem-solving and execution skills. A systematic investigation into NSAU's talent development model and

institutional practices offers valuable insights for contemporary higher education reforms. Its legacy provides a meaningful reference for universities seeking to foster innovative, adaptable, and broadly educated individuals in the context of today's rapidly evolving global challenges.

The general education curriculum at the National Southwest Associated University (NSAU) was primarily modeled on the American liberal arts tradition and embodied key features of general education as practiced in American universities. From Executive Committee Chair Mei Yiqi to the majority of professors who had studied in the United States, NSAU's leadership and faculty possessed a deep understanding of the American general education system. According to *Eight Years at the National Southwest Associated University*, a memoir jointly compiled by NSAU faculty and students, out of 179 professors at the university, 97 had received their education in the United States, 38 in continental Europe, 18 in the United Kingdom, and 3 in Japan. Among the three executive committee members, two had studied in the United States and one had not studied abroad. All five deans held doctoral degrees from American universities. Of the 26 departmental chairs, aside from those in the Department of Chinese Literature, two of whom were educated in continental Europe and three in the UK, the rest had studied in the United States.[1]

Notably, many of the American-educated professors at NSAU were alumni of institutions well known for their commitment to general education, such as Columbia University, Harvard University, and the University of Chicago.[2] As a result, NSAU's curricular structure was deeply influenced by the American model. At the undergraduate level, the curriculum was organized into three main components: major (specialized) courses, common compulsory courses (general education courses—including foundational subjects in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, as well as three non-credit but mandatory courses in political doctrine, moral cultivation, and physical education), and freely elective courses (including interdepartmental electives). This curricular framework was

systematically integrated with a credit-based system. The following sections will analyze the key features of NSAU's general education curriculum design in detail.

2. A High Proportion of Common Compulsory Courses: “Breadth Without Superficiality, Diversity Within Harmony”

At NSAU, general education was primarily delivered through common compulsory courses, which were systematically integrated into the university's credit-based academic framework. The university mandated that undergraduate students complete four years of study (five years for students in the Teachers College). According to institutional regulations, one semester hour of instruction per week equaled one credit, while internships or laboratory sessions counted as one credit for every two to three hours per week. Students were expected to enroll in approximately 17 credits per semester, with a lower and upper limit set at 14 and 20 credits, respectively. The undergraduate academic regulations further stipulated that students must complete a minimum of 132 credits for graduation (156 credits for those in the Teachers College).[3]

Across colleges, common compulsory courses accounted for approximately 54 credits—over 40% of the total graduation requirement—demonstrating NSAU's strong emphasis on equipping students with foundational knowledge. This general education framework was not only integrated with the credit system but also offered students a degree of flexibility in course selection. At the beginning of each academic term, departments would post printed course schedules on the earthen walls outside the Registrar's Office. Students would consult these schedules and manually mark their selected courses. If they needed additional credits or had intellectual interests beyond their major, they were permitted to take elective courses from other departments, making the system relatively flexible and student-centered.

With the exception of students in the Departments of Foreign Languages and the College of Engineering, most students were allowed to take 30 to 40 elective credits across their undergraduate years, amounting to approximately 30% of the total credit requirement.[4] Despite this curricular flexibility, NSAU recognized the importance of academic guidance, particularly for first-year students. To that end, the university established a Freshman Academic Advising Committee to provide targeted support.

The academic regulations also delineated the relationship between credits earned and academic standing:

“Students above the first-year level shall be classified based on accumulated credits: students with 33 credits shall be advanced to the second year; those with 66 credits to the third year; and those with 99 credits to the fourth year.”[3]

In their first year of study, students from all five colleges at the National Southwest Associated University (NSAU) were primarily enrolled in common compulsory courses. These courses were strictly mandated by the university: students were not allowed to drop any of them under any circumstances, and withdrawal would result in a grade of zero. Based on the standard workload of 17 credits per semester (34 credits annually), first-year students in the Colleges of Liberal Arts, Law and Business, and the Teachers College were required to complete a total of 38 credits in common compulsory courses. The College of Science required exactly

34 credits, while engineering students faced the heaviest academic burden, with a total of 41 credits. This was due to the fact that, in addition to university-wide general education requirements, engineering students also had to complete foundational technical courses such as Descriptive Geometry.

Among the compulsory courses required of all students were General Chinese (Year One), English (Year One), and Ethics. Beyond these shared subjects, the content and structure of general education courses varied by college. In the Colleges of Liberal Arts, Law and Business, and Education, the curriculum emphasized the humanities and social sciences. The College of Engineering, by contrast, had a distinct focus on technical and professional preparation. The College of Science offered a more balanced curriculum, combining natural sciences (such as Calculus and General Physics) with humanities courses (such as Chinese General History), along with elective options in the social sciences—typically a choice of one out of three courses.

By the second year, curricular design and credit distribution began to reflect greater specialization. Students in the College of Engineering, for example, took on increasingly demanding major-specific coursework. This differentiated structure of common compulsory courses among the five colleges embodied NSAU's guiding philosophy of general education—“breadth without superficiality, and diversity within harmony.” As President Mei Yiqi observed, the highest aim of a university lies in “the cultivation of broadly educated individuals (tongcai).” However, he emphasized that such generalist education must not be vague or directionless. Rather, it should incorporate a measure of disciplinary focus, resulting in what he called “generalist-specialists”: individuals grounded in general education but also trained in specific fields. In his words, “Each college—be it in literature, science, law, engineering, or agriculture—should cultivate generalists in those respective domains, and even interdisciplinary generalists across two or more fields. The greatest utility of higher education does not lie in producing narrow specialists or refined technicians.”[5]

Importantly, general education at NSAU did not emerge fully formed; rather, it evolved gradually through deliberations among the university's faculty. This reflected the institution's adherence to a governance model based on faculty autonomy. As philosopher Feng Youlan later recalled, the question of whether to implement generalist education was a subject of long-standing debate within the faculty council, and no final consensus was ever reached. Eventually, a compromise was established: general education would dominate the first two years, while specialization would take precedence in the third and fourth years of undergraduate study.[6]

A representative example can be found in the Department of Sociology within the College of Law and Business. Although its students shared the same set of general education requirements as others in the college, they were required in their second year to take a natural science course—General Biology—as foundational preparation for a mandatory major course in eugenics.[3] This case illustrates how NSAU's curriculum combined broad-based knowledge acquisition with differentiated, discipline-specific instruction. Through this integrative approach—balancing general and specialized education while remaining sensitive to individual student needs—NSAU developed a model that was not only educationally sound but also well aligned with the evolving demands of society.

The high proportion of common compulsory courses at the National Southwest Associated University (NSAU) did not reflect an intention to promote uniformity in student development. On the contrary, NSAU actively embraced the educational principle of “harmony without uniformity” (he er bu tong). Within an institutional culture that deeply valued academic freedom, both faculty and students were strongly averse to homogenized education. At one point, the Nationalist government attempted to mandate curricular standardization across all institutions, requiring NSAU to offer a fixed set of courses with uniform content. In June 1940, a group of NSAU professors collectively submitted a letter to the university’s executive committee expressing their opposition to this directive. The letter articulated their view on academic pluralism as follows:

“A university, as the highest institution of learning, ought to encompass a multitude of perspectives and approaches. While paths may diverge, the ultimate goals may be shared; unity does not necessitate sameness. One cannot impose conformity through rigid regulations. Among the world’s leading universities, none exhibits identical course structures; even where curricular names are standardized, the content delivered varies greatly. It is precisely this diversity that allows for innovation, and through such renewal, scholarship may advance continuously.” [3]

The fundamental goal of NSAU was to expose students to as broad a spectrum of knowledge as possible. As President Mei Yiqi once remarked, “The generalist takes precedence over the specialist.” This philosophy required students to first build a solid academic foundation and then pursue more specialized studies aligned with their individual interests and aptitudes. Taking the American model of generalist education as its reference, NSAU intentionally designed its curriculum to be inclusive and flexible, providing students with the freedom to shape their intellectual journeys.

As an engineering graduate himself, Mei Yiqi believed that students of engineering should develop a comprehensive understanding—not only of various branches within their field but also of the theoretical and technical dimensions of engineering, and even of the broader interplay between material knowledge and human values. In line with this vision, the College of Engineering, in addition to fulfilling the university-wide general education requirements, instituted 14 college-level compulsory courses. These included: Calculus, Differential Equations, General Physics, General Chemistry, Principles of Economics, Engineering Fundamentals, Descriptive Geometry (Projection Geometry), Foundry Practice, Forging Practice, Statics and Dynamics, Strength of Materials, Machine Elements (including Mechanics of Machinery and Kinematics), Mechanical Planning, and Mechanical Engineering Drawing. [5][3]

This curriculum illustrates NSAU’s dual emphasis: not only was professional education built upon a foundation of general education, but generalist thinking was also nurtured within professional training. The relationship between “general” and “specialized” was thus conceived as dialectical and mutually reinforcing, forming an integrated and continuous thread throughout the educational process.

3. “Learning by Doing, Applying What Is Learned”: Integrating Theoretical Instruction with Hands-On Training

The National Southwest Associated University (NSAU)

placed significant emphasis on integrating theoretical coursework with practical training, a pedagogical principle most clearly embodied in the College of Engineering. The cultivation of manual and technical competencies was seen as essential, particularly for engineering students. The College of Engineering was composed primarily of several pre-existing departments from the constituent universities: Civil Engineering and Mechanical Engineering from Tsinghua University, Electrical Engineering jointly from Tsinghua and Nankai Universities, and Chemical Engineering from Nankai University. In 1938, building upon the Aeronautics Division within the Department of Mechanical Engineering, NSAU formally established a Department of Aeronautical Engineering, thereby completing the structure of a five-department College of Engineering.

In addition to fulfilling university-wide general education requirements—such as General Chinese, English, Calculus, General Physics, and Principles of Economics—engineering students were also required to take a substantial number of laboratory and practicum-based courses. These courses were explicitly designed to strengthen students’ hands-on abilities and to ensure that they learned through doing. This “learning by doing” approach (zuò zhōng xué) became a defining feature of NSAU’s professional education model, effectively bridging the gap between abstract knowledge and practical application. It allowed students to internalize theoretical principles through repeated and contextualized practice, thereby enabling them to translate academic knowledge into real-world competence.

Based on the standard course load of 17 credits per semester (with a minimum of 14), students at NSAU typically completed approximately 136 credits over four academic years. In addition, students in the College of Engineering were required to take 8 to 11 credits in elective courses, bringing their total credit load to at least 140 credits over four years. As shown in Table 2, departments such as Mechanical Engineering and Aeronautical Engineering scheduled laboratory and practicum courses intensively, ensuring that students engaged in hands-on training every academic year. These practical components alone accounted for 12 to 14 credits. It is worth noting that the figures presented include only those courses explicitly titled “experiment” or “practicum.” Certain other courses, such as Hydrological Survey and Railway Curves and Earthwork, also embodied the integration of theory and practice but were excluded from this quantitative calculation.

Beyond the College of Engineering, NSAU’s Teachers College likewise placed strong emphasis on practicum-based learning. The Teachers College adopted a five-year curriculum structure. During the first four years, in addition to general and major-specific required courses, students were enrolled in teaching practicum courses such as Chinese Language Teaching Practicum (4 credits) and English Language Teaching Practicum (6 credits). The fifth year was devoted entirely to in-school teaching practice at secondary institutions.

Other colleges—such as the College of Science, College of Liberal Arts, and College of Law and Business—also integrated experiential components suited to their respective disciplines. These included social field visits, ethnographic excursions, and other forms of field-based inquiry, allowing students to connect academic knowledge with real-world observation and analysis.

NSAU’s overarching goal was to cultivate well-rounded

yet practically capable individuals-generalists who combined breadth of knowledge with applied competence. This cohort was not only expected to develop personal intellectual maturity, but more importantly, to fulfill a historical mission of serving the nation through learning and action during a time of national crisis. The university's educational model embodied a form of "scholarship for national salvation," echoing what French intellectual Julien Benda once described as the role of intellectuals as "the conscience of society." It also resonated with the Confucian ideal of the scholar who aspires to moral principles (*shi zhi yu dao*), Fan Zhongyan's dictum "to worry before the people worry, and to rejoice after the people rejoice," and Gu Yanwu's patriotic call that "every citizen bears responsibility for the rise and fall of the nation." [4]

Thus, NSAU saw its mission not merely as the preservation of cultural and intellectual heritage, but more crucially, as the training of practical nation-builders who, grounded in knowledge and skills, could contribute to China's survival and revitalization through applied action. It was not enough to produce generalists in the abstract; the university was committed to cultivating action-oriented intellectuals equipped with both broad vision and hands-on capability.

4. "One Course, Multiple Instructors": Broadening Students' Perspectives through Collaborative Teaching and Instructor-Developed Materials

The instructional model of "one course, multiple instructors" (*yi ke duo shi*) implemented at the National Southwest Associated University (NSAU) represents a highly innovative and pedagogically effective approach, particularly in the context of general education. This method enabled students to approach a single body of knowledge from multiple perspectives, thereby expanding their intellectual horizons and cultivating critical thinking. At the same time, it facilitated the optimal allocation of limited teaching resources-especially valuable during wartime, when the university faced a shortage of senior faculty members.

NSAU placed great emphasis on staffing its common compulsory courses with high-caliber instructors. Even foundational courses in the first and second years-such as General Chinese and General English, which had large enrollment numbers-were taught, at least in part, by renowned scholars and professors.[3] Nevertheless, the scarcity of distinguished faculty made it impractical for any single professor to teach every section. To address this, NSAU adopted a flexible instructional structure: large lecture courses were taught collaboratively by multiple senior faculty, while smaller, discussion-based or skills-oriented components were handled by junior instructors or teaching assistants.

For example, General Chinese I, a six-credit course, was divided into two components: Reading (4 credits) and Composition (2 credits). The Reading section was further divided into seven groups, each led by a distinguished scholar-Xu Weishi, Luo Yong, Zhu Ziqing, Pu Jiangqing, Wang Li, Yu Guanying, and Chen Mengjia-who delivered large lectures in rotation. Each professor taught for one to two weeks, selecting literary texts they had personally studied in depth, thereby introducing students to a wide range of styles, genres, and interpretative approaches.[4]

General English I followed a similar model. Senior

professors delivered lectures on literary texts, helping students not only improve their language proficiency but also deepen their understanding of Western society, culture, and historical context. The goal was to integrate language learning with literary appreciation, thereby enhancing both communicative competence and intellectual development in line with the objectives of general education. Professors delivered their lectures in English, providing students with immersive exposure to spoken English and cultivating their listening and comprehension skills. Meanwhile, writing instruction was conducted in small-group settings, taught by junior faculty or teaching assistants. Students were required to compose an English essay in class each week, which instructors reviewed and returned with feedback during the following week.

Similarly, courses such as Chinese General History, World History, and Introduction to Mathematical, Physical, and Chemical Sciences were taught by two to three professors simultaneously in different classrooms. Each professor brought their own academic perspective and methodological approach to the material. At NSAU, it became something of an unwritten rule that foundational courses were to be taught by professors. Each of these instructors had a distinct teaching style and scholarly specialty, contributing to a richly diverse academic environment.

The "one course, multiple instructors" model not only alleviated the pressure of limited faculty resources, but more importantly, exposed students to a variety of intellectual voices. It cultivated an academic atmosphere characterized by "a hundred schools of thought contending" (*baijia qiming*), in which students learned to compare, evaluate, and reflect critically on divergent perspectives. This process of dialogic learning empowered students to develop independent judgment and analytical thinking-core competencies in both general education and lifelong scholarship.

In terms of instructional materials, the National Southwest Associated University (NSAU) primarily adopted a model in which course textbooks were self-compiled by the teaching faculty. Depending on the nature of the course and the expertise of the instructors involved, textbooks could be collaboratively compiled or individually authored as part of a professor's scholarly output.

For instance, in the case of General Chinese I, a designated textbook was developed specifically for the course. In 1938, NSAU established a General Chinese Textbook Committee, which invited all instructors of the course to recommend readings. The committee then collaboratively compiled the textbook and continued to revise and refine it based on classroom use until a finalized version was produced in 1942. The completed reader included 15 selections of classical Chinese prose, 11 essays in vernacular Chinese, and 44 classical poems. Notably, the compilers incorporated modern literary works that reflected the ideals of the New Culture Movement, including prose, fiction, drama, and literary theory. This inclusion was groundbreaking and of far-reaching significance. It not only introduced the vernacular literary tradition-developed in Beijing, the cultural center of China since the May Fourth Movement-to the more conservative and relatively isolated Southwest region, but also directly challenged the Ministry of Education's revivalist tendencies at the time. In contrast to the NSAU edition, the official General Chinese textbook commissioned by the Ministry's editorial board contained 50 classical prose selections and only 4 poems, with no vernacular texts at all.

Likewise, high school textbooks of the period were composed entirely of classical works.[3]

The course Chinese General History, by contrast, did not rely on a standardized textbook. Instead, it provided a platform for instructors to showcase their distinctive intellectual styles and research orientations. For example, Professor Qian Mu, whose scholarship was deeply rooted in Chinese cultural nationalism, emphasized the determining role of cultural tradition in historical development. His *Outline of National History* (Guoshi Dagang), written while teaching at NSAU, encapsulated his core historical views. Professor Lei Haizong, influenced by the German historian Oswald Spengler, advocated a cyclical theory of history and structured his lectures chronologically to highlight the periodicity of civilizational development. Professor Wu Han, meanwhile, interpreted post-Qin unification China as a centralized feudal empire, and focused his teaching on institutional evolution across dynasties.

These cases illustrate how NSAU encouraged professors to integrate their research expertise into teaching, thereby achieving what is often described as mutual enrichment between teaching and scholarship. By allowing instructors to shape course content based on their own academic pursuits, NSAU ensured that the classroom remained a dynamic space of intellectual inquiry rather than a static reproduction of canonical knowledge. This approach not only enlivened general education, but also contributed to the formation of original scholarly works that in turn shaped national academic discourse.

5. Conclusion

The National Southwest Associated University (NSAU) was a remarkable product of extraordinary historical circumstances. Though founded amid wartime hardship and operating from humble thatched cottages, it succeeded in cultivating a generation of exceptional talent during the most challenging years of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Among its alumni were two future Nobel laureates—Yang Chen-Ning and Tsung-Dao Lee. In total, 90 graduates would go on to become academicians of the Chinese Academy of Sciences or the Chinese Academy of Engineering. Of the 23 scientists recognized as pioneers of China's nuclear and aerospace programs (“Two Bombs, One Satellite”), eight were former students or faculty of NSAU. Four of the recipients of the State Preminent Science and Technology Award—the nation's highest scientific honor—were likewise associated with the university.

To the outside observer, NSAU's success might appear paradoxical—a so-called “Sphinx riddle” of education. But a closer examination reveals the concrete historical and pedagogical foundations beneath the mythos. A major pillar of this success lay in the university's unwavering commitment to general education, its rational and adaptive curriculum design, and its vigorous, practice-oriented institutional operations.

From a curricular perspective, the general education philosophy embraced by both university leadership and faculty was rooted in a synthesis of modern Western liberal education and traditional Chinese intellectual values. General education was not an abstract ideal but part of a systematically structured and credit-aligned academic system. Informed by both pragmatism and patriotism, the curriculum emphasized not only foundational knowledge but also hands-on skills, promoting a vision of education that was “broad but not

superficial, diverse yet coherent.”

The tri-university merger brought together a rich and diverse pool of academic talent, which NSAU leveraged through its innovative “one course, multiple instructors” model. This approach fostered an intellectually pluralistic environment marked by freedom of inquiry and academic dialogue—an ecosystem in which no single voice dominated, and students were encouraged to think independently and critically. Furthermore, the university's practice of using instructor-developed teaching materials organically bridged research and pedagogy. Professors were not merely transmitters of knowledge but active producers of it, with their scholarly insights feeding directly into the classroom and, in turn, being refined through teaching.

In terms of institutional practice, NSAU supported its elective system with rigorous academic standards. Its “strict admission, strict graduation” policy emphasized quality over quantity and ensured that educational excellence was not compromised. Even under wartime conditions—when resources were scarce and campuses were makeshift—university administrators made extraordinary efforts to supply adequate laboratory equipment and teaching materials. Faculty and students could endure poor living conditions and simple meals, but experimental and practicum training could not be compromised. The university also actively partnered with external enterprises, integrating education with social service and achieving mutually beneficial outcomes.

The university's strong emphasis on hands-on skills development was shaped not only by its Tsinghua-engineering lineage, but also by the powerful wartime ethos of “learning for national salvation.” NSAU's educational philosophy aligned seamlessly with the nation's urgent needs, producing graduates who were both intellectually well-rounded and technically capable.

Ultimately, the curriculum structure and institutional practices of NSAU revealed a distinct model of general education: one that, while influenced by American liberal education, evolved through the integration of three academic traditions and became increasingly localized—resonating with Chinese cultural heritage and tailored to the nation's historical conditions. Behind the so-called “Sphinx riddle” of NSAU's success was neither mysticism nor miracle, but the dedicated and pragmatic efforts of its faculty and students. General education was not merely a component of the university's curriculum—it was one of the principal foundations of its enduring legacy. Even today, NSAU's model of general education and institutional innovation continues to offer valuable lessons for the reform of higher education in China.

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