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# Character and Quality Versus the Nationalization of the Curriculum

*Robert W. Hendersen*

Technology is simultaneously a boon and a threat to higher education, and the uncertainties that derive from this Jekyll-Hyde duality pervade discussions of the near-term future. Several of the participants in the Academic Leadership Roundtable fretted explicitly about the ways technology is changing what are woodenly called "instructional delivery systems." The fear is that changes now underway seriously threaten the continued existence of universities such as Grand Valley. I believe this threat is real, but I also believe that its root causes are not technological: they are, rather, primarily economic and social. Unless we understand the nature of this threat and address it directly, we, as an institution, may become obsolete.

Adrian Tinsley, in a talk which established themes that resonated throughout the meetings of the Academic Leadership Roundtable, cited the example of the "virtual university," which eleven Western governors are exploring as a way to save money by devising a means "to credential learning without the public expense of academic buildings, classrooms and faculty." Tinsley said, "This is an interesting development, and the technology now exists to make it possible."

An editorial this summer in *Science* struck a similar theme. It was written by Donald N. Langenberg, the chancellor of the University of Maryland system, who speculated "that many universities may die or change beyond recognition as a result of the IT [information technology] revolution." Langenberg further argued that "the 100 or so major research universities probably will persist in recognizable form. Several hundred institutions whose primary focus is the liberal education of full-time, campus-resident, recent high-school graduates will persist as well. That leaves about 3,000 institutions of higher education serving the vast majority of the nation's 14,400,000 college and university students in ways that will inevitably be profoundly transformed by IT."

Many of the changes that are moving higher education away from familiar territory do indeed have a technological component (even the ivy is watered by automated sprinklers), but I suspect that mammoth changes would occur even with older, more familiar technologies. The changes are coming for reasons that are largely economic, not technological. As states are harder pressed to find the funds necessary for higher education, there are enormous pressures to find cheaper ways to provide students with the degrees they seek. The way we respond to these pressures may determine our destiny.

While the Western governors dream of a virtual university with internet- or video-based classrooms, it is not the new means of instruction that make their plan viable. The technological development that seems most to have influenced the Western

governors is the interchangeable plastic block of the Lego® system (if this is unfamiliar to you, ask any child). Central to the development of the Virtual University is an array of interchangeable, largely indistinguishable courses, with the same basic character no matter how or where or by whom they are offered ("little boxes made of ticky-tacky," *pace* Malvina Reynolds). A student who takes Introductory Psychology at one institution should, by the logic of efficiency-expert-*manqué* governors, be able to use that course in any other institution's degree programs. It is this interchangeability, not technology, that makes the Virtual University possible; it doesn't matter whether instruction is delivered via the internet or by carrier pigeon. Interchangeability allows lower-cost instruction to substitute freely for higher-cost instruction.

One need not be a governor poring over a state budget to be spurred to cheapen the meaning of college degrees. Much the same attitude is prevalent at GVSU, again shaped by economic pressures. We depend heavily on transfer students, and so we accept as "equivalent" to our courses pretty much any course that has the same name or roughly the same description as one of our own. Occasionally we might raise a question about a course whose catalog description seems to have come from a different solar system. However, this is virtually never the case with community colleges, which attract students in part because they design their courses (and catalog descriptions) so the students will be able to transfer the credits to a bachelor's degree-granting school. This works both ways: If our lower division courses differ in too many ways from the courses offered at community colleges and four year institutions similar to ours, we would be closing ourselves off as an option for transfer students.

Such pressures shape not just course equivalencies, but entire curricula as well. I spent some time this summer skimming through college catalogs, trying to discern how the psychology curricula at GVSU differ from those at other institutions. One of the patterns I noticed was that institutions with few transfer students often offer Introductory Psychology as a two-semester sequence, sometimes with an additional laboratory, rather than cram a huge range of content into a single semester. However, such two-semester Introductory Psychology courses are rare at community colleges, and, correspondingly, rare at colleges that depend heavily on transfer students. There are other differences. Colleges that do not accept large numbers of transfer students often draw fracture lines between content areas within psychology that differ from those we draw at GVSU; our course descriptions, particularly for those courses that are typically also offered by community colleges, reflect traditional patterns that gelled nationwide in the 1950s, well before GVSU came into existence. Surprisingly, despite GVSU's honorable history of experimentation and innovation, we offer little that is distinctive. In psychology, my own discipline, things have changed a great deal since the "standard" courses were developed, but if we were to modernize our curriculum so that it reflects the discipline as it now exists and as it is transforming, we would make ourselves less accessible and less attractive to transfer students.

The trend toward homogeneity of courses and curricula has many sources and is not limited to lower division courses. Professionals acting in their own guild interests have used their political clout to build increasingly specific curricular requirements into licensing and accrediting standards, a trend that ossifies both graduate and undergraduate curricula. Statewide agreements like Michigan's MACRAO can be expected to become regional (*c.f.*, the Western governors' regional Virtual University), while state licensing boards increasingly defer to national standards in their credentialing. We are seeing the nationalization of our curricula.

This growing homogeneity of courses and curricula is a threat to our existence. Once courses become fully interchangeable from institution to institution, economic pressures will inevitably benefit those institutions that can produce the greatest number of credits at least cost. Ph.D.-level faculty are more costly than M.A.- or M.S.-level instructors. Small classes cost more than large ones. Lighter teaching loads make instruction more expensive than heavier loads. Interchangeability of course offerings between GVSU and a community college serves both institutions by making them more attractive to prospective students, but it also raises the question, "Why should universities offer these courses at all if they are the same as those offered by community colleges with cheaper instructional costs?" Precisely this question is being raised in the legislatures of other states, notably California, and it is only a matter of time until we hear it resonating in Michigan.

Another sort of economic pressure comes to bear: Students want to accumulate credits at the least cost to themselves, and an important part of that cost is the work they put into their courses. A kind of Gresham's law applies not only to coins, but to course standards as well: Bad courses drive out good courses. Why take courses at GVSU, if you can take easier, interchangeable courses elsewhere?

Here, again, technology is often wrongly blamed. There is much hand-wringing at institutions like the University of Phoenix and the New School for Social Research, over the fear that these schools, which have a growing offering of electronically-delivered degree programs, will be able to attract vast numbers of students away from traditional campuses. Fretting about compressed video and the internet has a familiar sound to it: similar worries were triggered decades ago by the advent of televised courses. Instructors who have a lot of direct contact with students understand the advantages that personal contact has over even the most technologically sophisticated delivery systems for distance learning, so they do not develop Luddite impulses to slice internet cables.

Still, they have reason to worry. The real threat comes not from the technology but from the devaluation of what courses and degrees mean. The curricula offered by such older technologies as postal correspondence courses were still under the local control of institutions, with a few, well-publicized abuses by non-accredited "diploma mills." What has changed is not so much the technology as the degree of local control over what an institution offers, and this loss of local control makes it harder to hold an individual institution accountable for the quality of its offerings. The growing interchangeability of courses across institutions makes it difficult to question whether a course is pedagogically sound or whether its content is accurate and well

chosen, so long as it "matches" the national standard. In some courses, the content of the course is determined by the editors of commercial textbooks (as cynical a group of vipers as I ever hope to meet) as much as it is by faculties of institutions of higher learning.

As the curriculum nationalizes into assembly-line education with interchangeable parts, universities will continue to have a role in producing some of the interchangeable parts, but the assembly of the parts may occur under the aegis of statewide or regional organizations. A decade hence the very idea that a university might coherently integrate an enriching general education with more specific disciplinary education may seem as quaint and incomprehensible as requiring new students to wear beanies. General education will be one of the first casualties of the trends I am describing. As general education curricula become interchangeable statewide (see MACROA), then regionally (see the Western governors' Virtual University), then nationally (see the politics of the "culture wars"), they become increasingly susceptible to legislative, rather than academic, control. We risk losing control of the curriculum.

If we are swept along with this tide, we shall also lose the control we once had of our character and mission. For example, many of us are proud and boastful that GVSU values general education, even in its professional programs. Yet this distinctive aspect of our mission is already at risk because of the number of transfer students who largely avoid our carefully crafted general education program. Another aspect of GVSU that has served it well is its ability to identify and take advantage of new opportunities as they arise. As we become a more "standardized" version of a regional, comprehensive university, we lose the character and flexibility that permit us to benefit creatively from new opportunities by doing things differently from the ways other universities do them. When we lose character, we lose the fundamental values that guide us in deciding when to grab an opportunity and when to decline.

Thus, we must worry that our locally held values and sense of mission may be overshadowed by national trends toward conformity, homogeneity, standardization, and interchangeability. Soon it may make no more sense to talk of the distinctive mission of GVSU than it would to talk of the distinctive cuisine of the Standale McDonald's compared to the Jenison McDonald's.

How, then, should we react to this threat? There are some actions we can take through our various professional organizations that can affect these trends nationally. We must insist that accreditation, both of programs and institutions, be based on the quality of the offerings, rather than on how well these offerings match rigidly specified prototypes; that is, we must make sure that our professional organizations respect and encourage diversity in programs and institutions. Accrediting bodies should be empowered to question the quality of courses that are largely homogeneous across a wide array of institutions; being "no different from what everyone else is doing" should not be viewed as a sign of fitness. Within our state and region we must work to keep legislatures, licensing boards, and accrediting organizations from taking control of our curricula away from us. I am not particularly optimistic that we shall be

successful in these endeavors, because we shall be fighting some high-inertia trends.

There are, however, effective ways of ensuring that GVSU continues to occupy a valuable and (equally important) valued niche in higher education, and these require local vigilance and action rather than a Canute-like stand against the tide of national trends. I suggest that the crux of what we must do is *to ensure that our courses and curricula are distinctive in both their character and their quality*. To overwork the tidal metaphor, we should let GVSU rise to the surface and tack into the wind and against the current, charting its own course while other institutions are swallowed up by the forceful tides. (According to *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, a "laker" is "a boat for lake navigation; esp. a ship esp. designed as to draft, beam, length, or structuring to operate on the Great Lakes and associated canals.")

The biggest role in ensuring such distinctiveness of character and quality lies with individual faculty members as they design and teach their individual courses, but there are also roles for units and university-wide bodies in this endeavor.

As individual faculty we can take care to ensure that our courses are different, and, in identifiable ways, better, than similar courses offered at other institutions. It is particularly important that we be able to show that our lower division courses are different from courses of the same name offered at community colleges. Our courses should be taught by faculty members who are actively engaged in their disciplines, so they can introduce students to their disciplines as ongoing intellectual enterprises, rather than as bodies of settled knowledge. Our courses should be taught *by* authorities, not *from* authority, and textbooks should be viewed as teaching aids, rather than the repository and definition of the content of a course.

Moreover, our courses should be highly personalized, reflecting not only the distinctive needs of our particular students, but also the particular interests and skills of the faculty members who teach the courses. A student at GVSU should understand and appreciate that she or he is engaging in an educational process different from, and better than, what most community colleges offer (and, for that matter, what most other universities offer). For example, Professors David Bernstein, from Psychology, and Richard Joannis, from Sociology, are offering linked versions of their introductory courses this semester; students enroll in both classes and address the same problems from the conflicting perspectives of two different disciplines. These courses are unique to GVSU, not clones of nominally "equivalent" introductory courses in psychology and sociology.

Individual faculty members must have the academic freedom and the institutional support to experiment with how and what they teach. True experiments always risk unanticipated, unfavorable results, and we must tolerate some failed experiments as a necessary consequence of encouraging and abetting risk-taking. GVSU has a proud history of experimentation and enough experience with the failures that sometimes result to be adept at balancing useful experimentation with reflective caution.

In designing their curricula, units should be careful not merely to replicate what others are doing elsewhere. Units must offer programs of sufficient quality that they

can "get away with" features different from the routine ones expected by licensing boards, state certification laws, and accrediting bodies. Units must also be stringent in assuring that the faculty they hire and promote have the passion, skill, engagement, and authority to teach the kinds of special, character-laden courses that are necessary for GVSU to develop and retain a distinctive place in higher education.

University-wide policies and directions are also important. The University must nurture, sustain, and celebrate the distinctive character and quality of courses and curricula that I believe are essential to its survival. Particularly important is support for course development, which must be viewed as a continuous, rather than a sporadic, process.

Deciding when and how to limit the growth of the university is an important part of this process, as is the image of the university that our marketing efforts present to prospective students. The transition from a rapidly growing undergraduate enrollment (the motto seems to have been, "if they come, we will build it") to a more stable enrollment will shift the focus from numbers admitted and recruited and make us increasingly concerned with the quality of the preparation and motivation of our entering students. Corresponding changes in the proportion of transfer students may facilitate the ability of the university to retain and develop its distinctive character.

The intellectual climate of the campus is another important component of a university's character and quality; a strong and sustaining intellectual climate in student life cannot readily be achieved in a "Virtual University." GVSU should therefore put resources and creative energy into assuring that what happens outside the classroom is recognized by students to be an important part of their distinctive education. Intellectual climate is as important for commuter students as it is for residential students, and the university should develop physical facilities and human resources that support and enhance this climate.

GVSU already has a distinctive character in the intensity with which it values learning and teaching that facilitates learning. Because of the national trends I have discussed, we risk losing the ability to chart our own course and to build into our institutional structure the value we place on liberal education. We also risk losing our distinctive character as a truly nurturing, deeply respectful institution which can adapt creatively to opportunities. To avoid these losses, we must ensure that our courses and curricula are distinguished from the offerings of other institutions in ways that are intellectually substantive, pedagogically creative, and readily visible.