CORE CURRICULUM IN HIGHER EDUCATION—THOUGHTS ABOUT THE JOURNEY

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Before defining a core curriculum, it is imperative to examine whether the current undergraduate educational model is necessary. The most practical benefit of a college education is to obtain a specific type of employment after graduation. If employment is the only benefit of higher education, however, then a trade school approach would be more efficient.

Students could prepare for a career through a combination of classes, self-study, standardized testing and apprenticeships. The specific material and skills taught could be more directly influenced by employers and professional associations. The research function of higher education could be funded directly from private foundations, employers, professional associations and the government. The cost of education and the length of time needed to complete formal education could both be significantly reduced. Finally, the apprenticeship segment would foster meaningful employer-student connections.

A college education, however, is more than a path to employment. The college education is the exploration of life's possibilities. It is an attempt to awaken senses, exercise minds and jar emotions. At the end of the journey the student should be able to locate more doors to open, close or pass by. The graduate should have acquired more ways to succeed, fail and grow from both experiences. In sum, the student should have learned how to more fully experience life and contribute to society.

The core curriculum is the foundation of this expedition. The core curriculum is not an option, but rather the essence of undergraduate education. The core curriculum should be structured to inspire and assist students to cultivate their understanding of the world, expand their ability to fully experience life and motivate students to excel in their unique ways. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his 1837 Oration, "The American Scholar," cautioned:

Colleges, ... have their indispensable office,—to teach elements. But they can only highly serve us when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame. (91)

The core curriculum should be structured to achieve the following five objectives:
(1) develop reading, communication and math skills;

(2) develop an understanding of the various disciplines and their interrelationship;

(3) cultivate individual growth;

(4) cultivate social growth; and

(5) develop skills for independent learning.

The development of a student's reading, communication and math skills is fundamental to the achievement of the other core curriculum objectives. Language and numbers are the media of the student. The curriculum should contain courses that focus on math, reading, and oral and written communication skills. It is equally important however, that other courses in the curriculum include components to refine reading and writing skills in particular. This emphasis on improving the student's ability to effectively read and write must continue beyond the core curriculum.

Emerson warned that teaching students merely to read and understand the classics, stifles intellectual growth. Emerson explained that some young students believe that it is their duty to accept the views of philosophers such as Locke and Bacon, forgetting that such writers "were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books." He further states:

Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although in almost all men obstructed and as yet unborn. The soul active sees absolute truth and utters truth, or creates. In this action it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man. (88)

The core curriculum must teach students active reading. Active reading should encompass three levels. The first level is basic comprehension. The second level requires the student to develop the habit of challenging the validity or relevancy of the work. The final level requires the student to objectively relate the work to the student's knowledge, philosophy, perspective and life experiences.

A second objective of the core curriculum must be to develop an understanding of the various disciplines and their interrelationship. Students should be exposed to the various domains of knowledge. In addition to the traditional general education disciplines, college graduates should all have been exposed to the basic concepts and developments in medicine and law. For example, a course in legal research and writing
would enable students to intelligently examine legal issues throughout their personal and professional pursuits. By using relevant, current research topics, students could learn about a substantive area of law, the development of the law, and acquire the ability to access the law.

While most programs incorporate a broad disciplinary approach, the interdisciplinary approach has been neglected. In an essay titled, "What Does Society Need from Higher Education?" David L. Featherman examines the conflict between the discipline-based specialization and the advantages of a cross-discipline approach to education and research. Featherman explains the problem as follows:

... intensification of discipline-based specialization leads to a balkanization of knowledge and to great difficulties of communication, even in some cases between specialists in subfields of their own nominal discipline... How do we take advantage of our capacity for specialized knowledge while retaining the expertise for reassembling the pieces into wholes? Our current institutional practices at the most prolific research universities militate against cross-departmental, cross-discipline, cross-college synthesis. (40)

The answer, according to Featherman, lies in facilitating and encouraging multi and interdisciplinary coursework and research. Featherman refers to a 1971 Science magazine report stating that almost 50% of the "major advances in social science" from 1900 to 1929, and 66% of such advances from 1930 to 1971, were the product of interdisciplinary work. Featherman explained the benefits of the interdisciplinary approach to problem solving as follows:

This research more typically rejected the tendencies of individual disciplines to define solutions for a problem in terms of extant disciplinary paradigms, i.e., conventional theoretical and methodological frames of reference. Instead, the pooling of disciplines permitted—indeed, required—a first step of finding the problem, an iterative phase of problem redefinition from a variety of perspectives, that set the tone for a series of broadly conceived solutions. (40)

Cross-disciplinary perspectives and materials should be included in relevant courses. In addition, the core should contain at least one required course taught with a multi-disciplinary methodology. For example, a course examining a complex issue such as crime or world hunger would incorporate scientific, historical, sociological, legal, psychological and other relevant perspectives. The course could be taught by two professors from different disciplines.

The third objective of core curriculum should be to cultivate individual growth. The curriculum should challenge students to consider various views and perspectives. Students should be given the opportunity to develop their personal philosophical beliefs,
goals and priorities. In addition, the curriculum should be structured to build self-esteem in all students.

In her latest book, Revolution From Within, Gloria Steinem, addresses the effect of education on self-esteem. Steinem explains that women of all races and background are more likely "...to experience the anomaly of high academic achievement and low self-esteem." (120) Steinem cites various studies including a 1981 University of Illinois study that followed 80 male and female high school valedictorians from a variety of racial and economic backgrounds. All of the students went to college, and many also went on to graduate or professional schools. At college the woman had slightly higher grade point averages than the men. Steinem summarized the results of the study as follows:

After two years of college, however, intellectual self-esteem among the women had plummeted. Though 23 percent of the males and 21 percent of the females had described themselves as "far above average" in intellect when surveyed after high school, by sophomore year in college, that proportion had remained at 22 percent among the men—but dropped to 4 percent among the women. By the time these students graduated, 25 percent of the men had an estimate of themselves as "far above average"—but none of the women did. (124)

Steinem notes that the results of such studies apply equally to people of other backgrounds who are the victims of discrimination. She refers to the views of black leader Dr. Carter G. Woodson, in his 1931 book, Miseducation of the Negro, as arguing that progress should be measured "by what was being read, not just by how many people were able to read it" Dr. Woodson explained:

When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door...In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. (125)

The current response to these issues has been the development of various courses and programs that focus on areas that have been neglected by traditional studies. These programs (Women's Studies, African-American Studies, etc.) are an important first step toward developing an inclusive, well-rounded curriculum. These programs offer students who recognize the need for such classes an opportunity for growth. The programs also facilitate the critical need to develop faculty, research, and textbooks in these areas.

A second important step, however, is also to integrate the material from these programs into the core curriculum. As stated by Steinem,

...change means more than just integrating females and people of color into the curriculum, or into any existing structure, whether it is the work
force or a view of history. It means learning to see with new eyes—to question the very idea of "norms" against which all other experience is judged. If race is only discussed in relation to African Americans and other people of color—though it's equally or more important as a factor in the world view of European Americans—then the discussion only serves to reinforce racism. If an analysis of sexism takes place only in relation to women, it adds to women's feeling of burden and fails to alert men to the ways in which they are being limited, too. And where is the routine study of social forms other than hierarchy, patriarchy, and competition—or even an understanding that they exist? Where are the campuses as pioneers of the powers of self-esteem and human possibilities? (129)

Under the current system, these classes are available only to students who recognize their significance. Yet, the ability to appreciate this need requires the student to recognize that something is missing from her other courses. For example, a student's ability to recognize that her course entitled "Ancient Greek Philosophy", excludes the writings of Aristotle, is contingent on her prior exposure to Aristotle. The core curriculum must be structured to insure that all students are exposed to an inclusive educational experience.

The fourth objective of the core curriculum should be to foster social growth. Students must be challenged to consider their life in relation to other people, communities, cultures and nations. Students must be given the skills to understand and examine social, political and global issues. The core curriculum should include the study of issues relating to race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disabilities and ethnicity. The core should include education regarding non-Western history, philosophy, culture and literature. In his essay, Featherman examines the book, Preparing for the Twenty-First Century, by Paul Kennedy. Kennedy calls for a "reeducation of humankind," explaining that education:

implies a deep understanding of why our world is changing, of how other people and cultures feel about those changes, of what we all have in common—as well as what divides cultures, classes, and nations...Because we are all members of a world citizenry, we also need to equip ourselves with a system of ethics, a sense of fairness, and a sense of proportion as we consider the various ways in which, collectively or individually, we can better prepare for the twenty-first century. (43)

Finally, the core curriculum must develop skills for independent learning. The core should provide students with both the capacity and the desire to enhance their informal education after graduation. The core curriculum should assist students in perceiving education as a lifelong pursuit. Students should recognize that the body of knowledge concerning a particular course constantly evolves.

Students must also be given the skills to use effectively computers, the library and other resources to continue their education after graduation. Educators cannot predict
how the actions of people, nations and nature will interact to create future challenges for society. Educators can, however, provide graduates with the tools needed to confidently address those challenges.

References

