Do College Students Need a Major?

William Casement

For the last decade, the National Association of Scholars has led a staunch effort in support of general education. Various articles that have appeared in *Academic Questions*, speakers and interest groups sponsored by NAS and its affiliates, and in particular the report *The Dissolution of General Education 1914–1993* have fought against the ever-encroaching and seemingly overwhelming forces that have reduced teaching the basics of the liberal arts to the weakened state in which it exists today. There have been successes, but make no mistake about it, the situation has been and still is a defensive one. The fight has been to preserve, or to slightly enlarge and better organize, the piece of curricular turf that general education is allowed to maintain after the subjects students major in have appropriated their share. The majors are in charge–they are larger and more powerful than general education.

Even the strongest advocates of general education seem to assume the defensive posture, submitting to the pressure of majors, and accepting the role of keepers of leftover territory. Herein lies a shortcoming that is both tactical and philosophical. It is time now to get beyond the defensive posture, time to take the offense. Instead of trying to explain to people why general education is necessary as a preliminary or supplement to what students really go to college for, attention should be turned toward questioning the importance of the major. The assumption that a major is necessary or even beneficial in a college education needs to be challenged. This isn't simply to object that majors have grown too large; it is to go further and ask if students should have majors at all. Just what is it that justifies concentrating a large block of study on any given field? Are majors really necessary? Questions like these need to be brought into discussion about the curriculum, and put into the forefront of that discussion, if general education is to have a chance to overcome its position of weakness and to become what it is capable of and ought to be.

The practice of requiring students to have a major field of study is universal in our colleges. The practice has been with us for about a century, and as

William Casement is director of the Darvish Collection Gallery of Fine Art, 1199 Third Street South, Naples, FL 34102. He is a former professor of philosophy, and author of *The Great Canon Controversy: The Battle of Books in Higher Education* (Transaction Publishers, 1996) and a forthcoming book on reforming higher education.

college degrees have become increasingly geared toward job preparation, majors in professional fields have grown to consume half to three-quarters of a four-year degree. In liberal arts fields, where the requirements are usually a quarter to half of a degree, students tend voluntarily to pile on extra courses in their majors or to seek double majors. How did this situation come to be?

Historically our colleges began without majors. Antebellum institutions gave all students a uniform liberal arts program steeped in classical languages and literature, with a bit of science thrown in; there was no major in name, although in fact everyone was a classics major. That system gave way to radical change in the latter part of the nineteenth century due to the impetus toward the specialization of knowledge. At first many schools went to a wide open, or nearly so, elective system, figuring that students would find their own way in choosing courses. But it soon became apparent that graduates had neither a broad general knowledge nor a coherent specialized one. Giving students free rein to choose wasn't the answer. They lacked the expertise and the inclination for putting together wise course selections. Early in the twentieth century majors were established, along with general education requirements. What followed was a continuous tension between the demands of specialization and those of generalism, with the former gradually gaining the dominant position it holds today, and the latter left in an increasingly subordinate one.

My aim is not to turn back the clock to the antebellum college. While its curriculum did have *some* features we would do well to include today, much of it was irrelevant to our present needs. And it was becoming irrelevant in the nineteenth century, which is why it was abandoned. Unfortunately the replacement, too, is flawed, with its existence resting on two main arguments that have been in place throughout its history. One of them sees the major as vocational training or groundwork; the other sees it as an extension of general education that provides a uniquely rigorous sort of mental exercise. The offensive that general education needs to mount consists of subjecting these arguments to common-sense analysis.

The first argument starts with the division of labor. We live in a specialized world. To live in it successfully, each person needs to acquire knowledge of a specialization and carve out an occupational niche based on it. The idea is that students should carve out this niche as soon a possible, not delay this important step in their lives. So they choose science majors to prepare for eventual careers in medicine and research; social science majors to become economists, psychologists, city planners, and attorneys; majors in business, engineering, and architecture for the obvious careers connected with them. Majors in the humanities and arts have fewer clear-cut vocational connections, but even there many students aspire to be professors, performers, writers, and so on. The bottom line is that all students must pursue majors, and the prevailing wisdom says they should do so with the job world in mind.

One problem with this way of thinking is that many of the students who take a particular major to prepare for a particular profession will then go on to graduate school to train for it. But graduate schools in many fields require no particular undergraduate major for admission. MBA programs don't, law schools don't, graduate programs for elementary school teaching certification don't, masters and doctoral programs in fields like psychology, English, economics, and philosophy don't. And the admissions tests they rely on heavily—the GMAT, LSAT, GRE (general test), and MAT—assess only for general knowledge and thinking skills, not for specialized information. These graduate programs do want applicants to have a *basic* grasp of certain subject matter, but that can be considerably less than a major. What they want most are sharp students who can make up any subject-matter lackings they may have. Medical schools, too, are now leaning in this direction. A demonstrated ability in basic science courses is mandatory, but a major in science isn't. And the all-important MCAT assesses students in four areas, two science and two non-science: Physical Science, Biological Science, Verbal Reasoning, and the Writing Sample.

While the point here doesn't hold for all fields, particularly some scientific and technical ones, it does apply for many students. Why should they take an undergraduate major, why should they specialize, if they will be going on to graduate school anyway, where they will do extensive specialization? Common sense says that if a bachelor's degree is to be a preliminary step before graduate school, and entrance into graduate school does not require a major of any particular sort, students don't really need a major. Would they not be better off with broad-based liberal arts degrees? Will our future attorneys, business executives, teachers, physicians, and others not be better trained in the long run if they acquire as much knowledge about as many things as possible while undergraduates, rather than plunging early into the narrowing experience of professional study? Society's demands would say so—for more circumspect and ethical attorneys, for business professionals with better basic skills, for teachers who know the content they are teaching as well as the methods of teaching, for humanistically oriented physicians. Graduate schools seem to realize this. It is now time for undergraduate schools to realize it as well.

Consider next the fact that many students are not comfortable in choosing a major. A good percentage do so only because they are forced to by the prevailing system. They haven't decided what they want their occupational niches to be, and in terms of having their college studies relate to their future in the job world they would be better off in a four-year diversified program without a major, where the general knowledge and skills acquired would relate to many possible jobs. This would be preferable to having to specialize in a field they are not committed to and may later abandon. It isn't uncommon for college students to spend much of their undergraduate careers bouncing

from one major to another. Some students change majors three or four times. After taking several courses in a particular field, a student agonizes over whether it's the right one to declare allegiance to, and then decides to try another one. Whatever basic courses were taken in that field will enrich the student in general liberal arts, but specialized courses beyond that simply become abandoned attempts at finding oneself. Students will find themselves when their inner makeup is ready for that to happen. Pushing them into specialization prematurely is not a good way to help the process along. Would it not be better to cease with the requirement of a major, and instead provide such students with an extended general education program? This does not mean making the mistake the elective system of a century ago did of allowing students extensive freedom to choose; what I have in mind as a solid general education program that involves many required courses. The choice students would have, however, a most important one, would be to avoid making one of life's most important decisions until they are ready for it.

So much for the argument for vocational preparation. It is flawed because there are many students who would be better served without pursuing a major for that purpose. But there is another argument that some educators make that has nothing to do with vocationalism, an argument that applies for all students and could be made about any major, although it tends to be thought of in terms of liberal arts majors. In order to be well educated, this argument says, in a general-education sense, a student needs to achieve a depth of knowledge in some single field. The experience develops the powers of reasoning and analysis. These powers are stretched in a way that cannot be done by taking a combination of courses in several fields. And the acute mentality that results can be applied in many of life's situations. In other words, having a specialization is important not in order to train someone as a specialist but rather to give the person maximum development as a generalist. Specialization is seen as an ally of general education.

As far as I am aware, proponents of this argument accept it as an article of faith. It has not been subjected to empirical testing or to logical analysis. To test it empirically would be impossible, since that would require a substantial group of graduates with no majors who could be compared with those who did have majors. Because our college system requires majors, the former group doesn't exist. What, then, of the logic of the argument? Does it make sense to accept that specialization makes for a better generalist, that digging deeply into one subject gives the mind more rigorous exercise than jumping from one subject to another, and that the result is a superior preparation for dealing with a variety of life's situations?

Consider the case of a student majoring in history. Will the mentality developed in taking specialized history courses be more beneficial than if the student instead took a diversified set of courses where the mind was forced to stretch itself not as far in one direction as a major would, but as far in several

directions as a minor. For one thing we can ask if the rigor involved is not as great or greater when the mind must work in the shifts and combinations that diversified learning brings compared with the rigor involved in specialization. One indicator here may be the interdisciplinary work many professors have done: Is it any less strenuous and challenging than the specialized work those same professors have done within single disciplines? For another thing, we should consider just what the mind is being prepared to do. Specialized study in history will teach a student to think like an historian, but how will this sort of thinking transfer to life in general? Will it mean that the history major's mind is ready to work incisively on all fronts—in other words, that a transfer of learning can be assumed? Or will it mean that the mind has developed an inclination to see everything from the perspective of history? Compare with the student who has taken an extended general education program, including history as well as other subjects. Would we not expect this person to be better equipped to meet the vicissitudes of life because of learning not only to think like an historian, but like a psychologist, a scientist, a philosopher, and an artist as well? Common sense suggests that the student with a diversified background will have a broader framework for analysis than the student who pursues the specialization of a major.

Up to this point my discussion has focused mainly on what is wrong with requiring students to have a major, with brief allusions to what should replace the prevailing system. Just what would that replacement be? Without going into detail, I will suggest a full four years of general education. Most of it would consist of requirements, and the emphasis in the courses would be on broad, basic knowledge: the foundations of the humanities (World and American history, the basic ideas of philosophy, great works of literature), history and techniques of the arts, the fundamental method and ideas underlying natural science along with the basics of each of its main divisions, likewise for the social sciences, and in math a knowledge of calculus, statistics, and a familiarity with computers. The requirements would cover about three years of study, and amount to roughly the equivalent of a minor in each of the main divisions of liberal arts knowledge (15 to 18 credits of a 120 credit degree, although I would go a little heavier on the humanities and the sciences and possibly a little lighter on the arts and math), but there would be no major taken from within any one of them. The specifics of what material would be taught in each of these divisions can be argued out at individual institutions, but the main idea is to emphasize the basics, to give students an overall breadth of knowledge that would include a reasonable amount of depth as well, but not force depth to an unneeded extent or in only one area.

The line of thinking I am presenting here—against majors and in favor of greatly expanded general education—will be perceived by many people as radical, and I anticipate objections to it. One of them is a defense of general education as it exists now. Numerous people have invested themselves in de-

signing and redesigning it, and will say that it accomplishes its purpose nicely, or at least as well as can be expected. The current system does introduce students to each of the major divisions of knowledge, and does expose them to the various ways of thinking with which those divisions are identified. Getting students to acquire the ways historians and psychologists and artists and scientists think is precisely what general education now focuses on.

The problem with this perspective is that it fails to recognize the extent of course work needed before someone can become comfortable with any given way of thinking. A typical general education program requires only one or two courses in each broadly designated area. Can we reasonably expect that through such minimal exposure someone has actually developed a way of thinking to any appreciable degree? What is meant by a "way of thinking" is, of course, vague. It often seems to be thought of as mere process without content, and the means of coming to have it as akin to learning a recipe or a formula. But serious thought about what it means to learn to think like an historian or philosopher or scientist should recognize that it is a complicated matter. Taking one or two courses will not be sufficient. If students are to leave college with a sense for how to apply philosophical thinking in their everyday lives, or with the ability to ask intelligent questions about issues involving science, or with the kinds of awareness that the ways of thinking of other disciplines provide, they will need to take several courses to do so to any appreciable degree. Several courses are less than a major, but more than the insufficient one or two that are standard in general education programs.

Another objection I anticipate is from people who would agree that the basic liberal arts learning students get today is inadequate, and who would buy into the idea of an expanded general education program. Consider the example I have offered of a major in history. Typically that major takes up only about a quarter of a student's bachelor's degree program. The same is true of certain other majors in the humanities and social sciences. Given that there are four years of study to be planned for, and that the set of general-education requirements I have suggested would occupy about three years, isn't there enough room left over for a minimally sized major? Students could have the best of both worlds: the advantages of specialism along with the advantages of generalism.

Certainly a curriculum like this would be preferable to what we have now; more, it would be a great improvement. But there is still a difficulty. It is still assumed that having a specialization, regardless of its size, is truly an advantage for students. And that is precisely what I am throwing into question. I have suggested that there is no more rigor in forcing the mind toward the greater depth of a major than there is in forcing it toward the lesser but significant depths of several different fields. And I have suggested that the way in which a major fine-tunes the mind may end up as a limitation more than an asset—inclining a student to see things from the narrows of one per-

spective alone. Add to this the fact that many students' interests aren't strongly enough defined to make a commitment to a major, and the fact that many others don't need one for the vocational preparation they desire since they will be getting that in graduate school. These are all telling reasons for questioning the practice of requiring students to have a major, and together they form a powerful and sensible rationale.

All of this isn't to say that *no* student should have a major. But it is to say that we shouldn't require it of *all* students. Those in fields like engineering and architecture, and those who have obvious and strong inclinations in other fields, should take majors, although some of the majors should be reduced to sensible proportions so as to allow room for a solid general education and, perhaps, for a few electives. For other students, there is no *good* reason for forcing them to specialize. They should have an alternative. The alternative I have suggested is not to replace the major with electives so students can choose courses as they wish. What they would benefit from is an extended program of general education, and a reasonable plan would be for a degree that includes several courses in each main area of knowledge, equivalent to having minors in each of those areas but no major. A good number of the courses should be specifically designated ones that are of the basic survey type and that ensure broad familiarity with the field.

To begin thinking in this direction would move advocacy for general education away from the defensive posture it assumes at present, and towards the offensive it should be capable of mounting. The curricular territory claimed by the college major can be put to better use for many students. General education has time and again been forced to justify itself, and that will continue. It is high time now that the major was forced to justify itself as well, and for its supposed strengths to be exposed as the weaknesses they often are.

Lifted from the minutes of a faculty meeting of the history department at Kansas State University:

[The associate provost] said that her advocacy position would be maximized if the department chose for the search a non-Western historian, especially if it were possible to fill the position with a person of color.