

The Core: A Pluralistic Approach

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I'd like to address this issue from my perspective as the father of a college freshman, and of a twelfth grader who is now trying to select the colleges to which to apply.

Does the curriculum have a core? The short answer I would offer you is: No, it doesn't, but it should, but even if it did that wouldn't be sufficient to cure what ails American higher education.

There is only a tiny handful of institutions with an authentic core curriculum, at least as most people would construe the term. There are fairly well-known ones, like Columbia University, Brooklyn College, and Saint John's College, as well as some lesser known ones, like Muskingum College and Phillips University in Oklahoma, with which I have only recently become acquainted. In the vast majority of our institutions, private as well as public, it isn't even clearly understood anymore what "core curriculum" might mean.

Anecdote: In the course of assisting my two kids with their college entrance preliminaries, I've visited about twenty colleges in the last two summers. There is always that moment after the prospective student is interviewed when the anxious parent is permitted to query the admissions officer about the institution. I had sort of a stock question. I said, "Tell me about your core curriculum." And without exception, they began to tell me about their distribution requirements. *Without exception.* The young admissions office types don't even know what you mean when you say "core curriculum." They literally don't know the difference between a core curriculum and distribution requirements.

Some institutions have consciously blurred this line, Harvard probably being the most famous here. They call it a core curriculum, but actually it is distribution requirements within a set of limited categories, in the manner of the old-fashioned Chinese restaurant menu. At other places there is an authentic core, but it's minuscule. It's just two or three courses comprising a tiny fraction of the curriculum. At still other places you might find what one could call an "optional core," in which there is a well-designed package of integrated courses that collectively provide quite a nice core curriculum, but it's up to you whether you sign up for it or not. I might say that my daughter, who is enrolled at Kenyon College as a freshman, is having precisely that experience this year. Three-quarters of her entire year consists of an integrated humanities sequence that is in fact causing her to read the kinds of books I would like college freshmen to read. She and, I believe, twenty-four other freshman are part of this program, but it was entirely optional as to whether they signed up or not.

The defining characteristic of a core curriculum is pretty straightforward. It involves a consensus that there are some things that everyone passing through

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the institution must study and learn. These things may be many, but because they are deemed of sufficient importance to the nature of the education provided by that institution, everyone is obliged, like it or not, to study them. And, of course, it is this sense of obligation that is the nub of the problem, for to have a core obviously means that the faculty is prepared to wield authority and to impose obligations. It must be willing to do more than just dish up a smorgasbord for students to graze at. And we all know that wielding authority, indeed, even believing in any authority associated with knowledge or faculty position, is unfashionable on campus and has been so for nearly two decades. We also know that obliging students to do things they may not want to do, and might not choose on their own, is *bad* marketing strategy at a time when colleges are competing for students. Offering students ever more choices, ever more different and diverse opportunities, is the much more common institutional strategy.

Obviously, lots of other things are going on as well: the proliferation of departments and their fragmentation into subdepartments, for example; and the mushrooming of majors and joint majors and nonmajors and new, individually designed majors and nondisciplinary fields of every sort, have meant that most faculties contain many more intellectual factions than ever before. Of course, the process of creating a core inevitably has to involve the welding of these factions together into some sort of consensus about a program of study which will give the interests of certain professors greater standing than others. The absence of effective academic leadership on most campuses therefore contributes more than we may often realize to the difficulty of overcoming this curricular factionalism.

These are at least some of the reasons why there is so seldom a core in liberal arts colleges and universities. But let's keep this matter in perspective. Within the various professional schools, the core is alive and well, only it's a professional core. In medicine it starts with anatomy and pathology and physiology, in law with torts and contracts, in business with marketing and finance, and similar subjects. These are examples of courses that everybody takes while passing through a professional degree program, whether they like it or not, and whether or not the program is undergraduate or postgraduate.

I do not mean to suggest that in a professional school the core is immutable, or without controversy, or beyond change. As I understand it, even these core curricula have been shrinking as professional electives have proliferated in recent years. I believe that law school's three years used to consist of about two and a half years of core, and about half a year of electives. Now, as I understand it, even the second year typically has electives, and they may be edging into the first as well. In medicine, my wife, a pathologist, reports that the basic pathology course, which used to take a whole year, now takes just one-half a year. So, there is some erosion of the core concept even in the professional schools, as well as some possibly constructive changes in which better things are being

added to the traditional core material. Nevertheless, the proposition remains that there is a core of knowledge associated with the profession. Indeed, it is often remarked that the very definition of a profession is a group of people who possess in common a body of specialized knowledge. So, the widening of professionalism and vocationalism on campus, and the corresponding attenuation of the liberal arts, may be a sort of perverse way of keeping alive the practice of a core curriculum. But obviously it isn't the sort of core that those primarily concerned with the liberal arts have in mind.

The data on the state of the liberal arts, or the arts and sciences curriculum, are not extensive. But there is some new information in the recent National Endowment for the Humanities survey called "Humanities in America." And these data, which have been in the press lately, indicate that it is possible to graduate from about four-fifths of American colleges and universities without having taken any course in the history of Western civilization, or in American history. Now, that's not proof of the absence of a core curriculum, but what sort of meaningful core curriculum could there be that excludes the history of Western civilization or of the United States? Somewhat more reassuring data come from a recent American Council on Education survey, which checked its so-called "Higher Education Panel," consisting of several hundred member colleges and universities, to find out, among other things, about graduation requirements. This A.C.E. report says that about 90 percent of colleges and universities have some sort of general education requirement, and that for 56 percent this includes a requirement in Western civilization.

Now, I'm not absolutely certain about the discrepancy between the N.E.H. and the A.C.E. data. I rather suspect that it lies in the definition, with the National Humanities Endowment employing the more precise or narrow phrase "history of Western civilization," and the American Council on Education leaving off "the history of" part. And if you leave off "the history of" part, and just say "Western civilization," then it may become possible for a course in "racism in Western civilization," or "protest thought in Western civilization," to satisfy the Western civilization requirement. However, you still could report that you had a Western civilization requirement when asked. That's my hunch. And obviously this is tied to the distinction between a core curriculum and distribution requirements.

I favor core curriculum, but I'm not a fanatic on the subject. A tightly drawn set of distribution requirements that permit students some choices among actual courses is a legitimate approach to undergraduate education. But it's got to be drawn tightly enough so that it doesn't enable students seeking the path of least resistance to avoid the essence of the subject or the field of knowledge. And this is too often the case. I cannot tell you how many of the colleges I visited these past two summers would suggest via their student tour guides that, "If you don't like labs, it's okay to take psychology—that satisfies the science requirement."

I admit to some equivocation here. I personally think that every educated person should read and reflect on certain great works of the humanities, and should also know some principles of science, some geography, and a variety of other subjects. I also believe in cultural literacy à la E. D. Hirsch, and I subscribe as well to the premier finding of education research, namely, that if you don't ever study something you are not too likely to learn it. The second finding, and this, alas, is also a commentary on human nature, is that, like most people, if you're not obliged to learn it, you won't.

Yet I also believe that colleges and universities should differ from each other. It is one of the authentic strengths of American education that what you study and the way you study it at N.Y.U., for example, will not be identical to what you would find at Columbia or Bard or Marymount or City College. Colleges ought to differ as to their curricula, and not just as to the number of snack bars in the student center, or MacIntosh computers in the computer center, or keg parties in the fraternity houses. Differences in curricula and in modes of instruction ought to be, in fact, the primary basis for choosing one college rather than another. And these differences can legitimately encompass both the definition of the core curriculum and the relationship between a core curriculum and other academic requirements. Indeed, I believe colleges should differ in these respects more than they do today.

Again, I submit, after visiting about twenty colleges, that they really do run together. You keep trying to remember which was the one that had four and which was the one that had five distribution requirements in the humanities, and where they divided natural science from physical science, and where they divided natural science from history, and so on. They're really not very different from each other with respect to requirements, and I think that to the extent that people select colleges it ends up being on other grounds, even though it ought to be on these.

I realize I'm conceding a central point by allowing for, even welcoming, the possibility that an educated person who goes through Wesleyan won't end up learning the same things as an educated person who goes through Michigan State. I'll take that risk. Frankly, it's of rather larger concern to me that the faculty at Wesleyan have a clear idea of what an educated person who graduates from Wesleyan *should* know and be able to do. And the same obviously applies to faculty at Michigan State. Of course, each institution should then live by its convictions and ensure that its graduates do, in fact, know those things that its faculty considers to be central.

Does this mean that the graduates of college "A" may never encounter Plato, Shakespeare, or John Stuart Mill, while the graduates of college "B" may never encounter Galileo, Newton, and Einstein? I know I'm taking that risk, much as I hope it doesn't lead to that result. I can't make promises because I'm trusting to something which is very precarious, namely the good judgment of faculties to consider what their graduates ought to learn, and their willingness then to

ensure that they actually learn those things. And I'm also trusting that there will turn out to be some fair degree of overlap or commonality among what those hundreds of separate faculties will come up with, even though their products will not be identical. Trusting to faculties in the late 1980s to make wise educational policy decisions may be an act of folly.

But it is probably better, though not certainly so, than trusting to others to make these decisions. Some have suggested that we could turn to state legislatures, or governors, or alumni, or even various off-campus pressure groups to intervene in curricular decisions on campus. While I certainly don't think that's necessarily all bad, I don't think it's all so good either. I think we should be particularly mindful of the tradeoff between considerations of institutional sovereignty, on the one hand, and the goodness of the possible outcomes on the other. And I am, of course, just slightly mistrustful that the state legislature, when it puts its mind to the core curriculum, will come up with a thoroughly satisfactory answer.

I want finally to suggest that even if we do a bang-up job of creating and installing a core curriculum everywhere in the land— in all 3,400 colleges and universities in this country—we are still not going to have achieved paradise. Because even this, as important as it is, will not satisfactorily guarantee that we have on-campus accountability for results and performance, or good and appropriately rewarded teaching, or a tradition of open discourse on the campus, or a serious interest in nurturing values and character and good behavior on that campus, or an ethos of reasonably hard work by students and faculty members alike, or institutional efficiency and productivity, giving value for money to their tuition-payers, taxpayers, and other donors. Fixing up the curriculum doesn't guarantee that any of those other absolutely essential things will also follow; and they need to follow if we are going to have satisfactory higher education in this country.

My last thought is that the state of the higher education enterprise inevitably intersects with what's going on in the schools. The high schools now send more than half of their graduates into the colleges, and we cannot today count on the average American high school graduate having already encountered a core curriculum. Certainly, a part of our anxiety about the core curriculum in college stems from our anxiety about the ignorant philistines we are graduating from high school, and the fact that they didn't learn what we had hoped they might.

The core curriculum, such as it is in the nation's schools, is very skimpy. Even if you are prepared to settle for course requirements as evidence of the core curriculum, try asking how many American high school graduates, while enduring four years of high school, took a program of study that includes, at minimum, four years of English and three years each of math, science, and social studies. (For the moment I'm leaving off the foreign languages, computer science, and everything else one might think of.) The answer is that in the high

school graduating class of 1987, less than 30 percent of the graduates had taken that package of courses, and better than 70 percent had taken something less than that. Incidentally, if you're interested in equal opportunity in this society, that pattern doesn't distribute itself evenly by ethnic group. About 30 percent of the white kids had taken those courses, as compared to about 21 percent of the Hispanic kids, about 23 percent of the black kids, and 52 percent of the Asian kids.

Go back to my proposition that if you've never studied something you're not likely to learn it. If you care about equal opportunity, you've also got to care about what people are actually encountering on their way through school, and why they are allowed to get through school while encountering so little. And, incidentally, if you add the two years of foreign language and the half a year of computer studies—bringing yourself up to what the National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended as the “new basics” in “The Nation at Risk” report in 1983—then only 13 percent of the high school graduating class of 1987 had taken the new basics curriculum, while 87 percent had not.

They arrive in college in September, I think, as ignorant as they leave high school in June. That being the case, we have to ask ourselves, “What is it the colleges are supposed to do?” Let me just suggest that one of the things colleges probably are supposed to do is to provide them with that basic general education, including but not limited to a core curriculum, that we would like every educated American to acquire somewhere along the line.