

Handout on Curriculum Trends

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The United States is engaged in an extended debate about education. Moreover, we are involved in a curriculum reform movement. This is our great secret. The public doesn't know this. What they know is that we are talking a lot about education and that education is not faring well. Even many academic leaders are unaware of the scope and magnitude of the changes taking place around them. In part this is because change is taking place in many different institutions and in different areas—it is scattered and diffused. But if seen together, disparate strands add up to an impressive agenda of curriculum change. College faculties are reaching agreement on the qualities of an educated person and they are taking steps to more intentionally cultivate them by changing graduation requirements, the curriculum structure, individual courses, and teaching-learning approaches.

Below are some of the more important changes that are taking place in the curriculum in large numbers of colleges and universities that are studying and revising their general education programs. Here is my quick list of curriculum trends. (While my focus is on general education, most trends transcend the, formal general education portion of curriculum.)

1. *Liberal arts and sciences subject matter.* The liberal arts and sciences are the most fundamental and useful bodies of knowledge, methods, and perspectives devised by the human mind. Driven by the recent concerns for excellence, they are taking a more prominent place in new curricula, even in professional and pre-professional programs. Indeed, by their common reliance on the arts and sciences, liberal and professional education are closer today than at any time during my career.

2. *Fundamental skills.* Skills such as writing, speaking, logical and critical thinking and thinking, foreign language, mathematics, and computing are emphasized in modern curricula. And new mechanisms are used to teach them. We have learned that writing is like a muscle. If it is exercised it grows stronger; without exercise, it atrophies. That is the basic rationale behind the widespread practice of teaching writing—and other skills—across the curriculum.

3. *Higher standards, more requirements.* More stringent and specific graduation requirements, and sometimes higher expectations for entering students, are the order of the day.

4. *Tighter curriculum structure.* The trend is away from loose distribution requirements that students can satisfy with any of a large number of courses. Distribution, exposure, and breadth are a minimalist definition of general education. The trend is toward a limited set of purposeful courses that meet specific criteria. Frequently, courses offered by individuals and

departments must be approved by an institution-wide committee that certifies they serve specified educational purposes.

5. *The freshman year.* The old practice was social Darwinism, survival of the fittest. Now institutions are trying to help all students succeed through such means as freshman topical seminars, extended orientation, stronger advising, and greater attention to the intellectual and personal development of students.

6. *The senior year.* Increasingly, students are expected to pull together their learning and demonstrate their abilities through such devices as senior seminars) research projects, artistic productions, and internships.

7. *Global studies.* Given the interdependence of economic systems, environmental problems, security needs, and other aspects of modern life, colleges are emphasizing the study of other peoples, both in the West and the non-West.

8. *Cultural pluralism.* Another trend is greater attention to race, class, and gender within America and the Western traditions and the incorporation of the new scholarship on these topics in the core curriculum.

9. *Integration of knowledge.* Thematic, interdisciplinary, and topical courses and programs are found in many revised curricula. Learning communities and collaborative learning have proliferated around the country as means to foster connected knowing.

10. *Moral reflection.* More than technical expertise is expected of an educated person, and institutions are reemphasizing values through the studies of professional ethics, social problems, and the implications of new developments in science and technology.

11. *Extend through all four years.* Rather than consisting of introductory courses and relegated to the first two years, new general education programs often include advanced and capstone courses and extend throughout all four years. This allows greater depth and provides opportunities to be integrated with the academic major. Indeed, in a project with accrediting institutions in four professional fields—business, education, engineering, and nursing—we are prepared to publish a report in which one of the major recommendations is that general education and the major should be integrated.

12. *Active learning.* In order to get away from what Alfred North Whitehead called “inert ideas”, some colleges have established a policy that core courses require active learning. Of course, skill courses, freshman and senior seminars, and courses that deal with ethics or multicultural subjects call for more personal, experiential, and interactive pedagogy than is typical.

13. *Assessment.* Assessing student learning is increasingly common, both to determine the extent to which a new curriculum is effective and to identify problems that call for change.

14. *Faculty development.* Faculty are key to designing and implementing any change in the instructional program. Institutions serious about reform provide seminars, workshops, retreats, travel, and other forms of assistance to help faculty acquire new knowledge and develop new courses with innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Much of this is necessarily done in groups that cross the disciplines as faculty collectively fashion new programs.

15. *Administration.* Although university administration has expanded, the fact is that in many respects the academic program is under administered. Whenever our association launches a new project, whether dealing with instruction in foreign language, diversity, or general education, one of the first things campuses do is establish a new leadership team. Institutions wanting more purpose and coherence have decided they must create a new administrative position to coordinate the many people and activities to assure purposes are achieved and to forge coherence in the core curriculum. And part-time directors of curriculum components, such as freshman seminars, writing, or multicultural education, may be critical to their success.

16. *Academic community.* Strengthening general education both draws from an academic community and further builds that community. Without a modicum of understanding and appreciation of the entire academic enterprise, it is difficult to reach agreement on shared principles that is necessary for a core curriculum. When a campus reaches agreement on what constitutes an

educated person, designs a curriculum to self-consciously cultivate those qualities, and implements a coherent program with a certain amount of common learning, those actions further the development of community. We have learned that students learn more when studying in a community, even in subjects like mathematics and science, than when they learn by themselves.

Critics may lament that these changes do not go far enough, are not widespread enough, or are too superficial. Or in the words of the noted philosopher Grouch Marx, “There is less here than meets the eye.” And of course they are right. More can and should be done. But the undergraduate curriculum is in the process of change, especially when faculties give their serious attention to general education.