

Universal Course Requirements Some Thoughts Regarding Higher Education

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A perusal of over 300 college and university catalogs reveals that some sort of universal college requirements are imposed on students regardless of where they attend school. These requirements are most often institution wide; however, in about 5% of the cases, such mandated courses were imposed on all students by colleges or divisions within the university structure. In no cases did I discover an absence of such universal requirements. If such cases occur, they are rare. Such universal course requirements assume the nomenclature: "general education," "standard requirements," and "core requirements," among other lesser used names. This essay will use the name "core" to refer to these common course requirements.

The core, in most schools' catalogs, amounts to a significant proportion of an undergraduate student's curriculum. My search of 326 different college and university requirements revealed a range of 20% of the undergraduate curriculum to 50% of the students' course load. The average core requirements comprised slightly over 41% of the entire undergraduate curriculum. What makes this type of requirement interesting and so compelling a pedagogical matter is that in 326 independent cases, not one exact duplicate was discovered! There were some core listings that closely resembled other schools' requirements; however, the diversity of required courses seemed staggering.

What is the purpose of core requirements? This question seems a natural outcome from a perusal of diverse requirements. Could the variety of core schemes be the epitome of equifinality? Can one or a few noble goals served by a core requirement be achieved by a myriad of optional paths? Or, are there no common goals reached by core requirements? Such is the substance of this paper: what ends are sought in imposing universal course requirements and what results seem to be achieved by these means?

An informal poll of higher education colleagues across academic disciplines, from institutions of all sizes and missions, and from schools in all regions of the country was conducted from 1990 to 1992. One hundred and fourteen college/university professors via telephone, mail, and on site professional conference means were independently polled about two related concerns: (1) What publicly stated or published rationales do institutional

administrators and core requirement advocates and defenders offer against questions about, challenges to, or attacks upon such universal course requirements? and (2) What purposes for universal course requirements, if any, are served that do not fit into question (1) above?

Question one elicited a fairly expected set of responses; that core requirements provide: (1) What everyone expects a college student to know (given by 96 respondents); (2) Knowledge needed to get a well rounded education (given by 81 respondents); (3) Knowledge requisite to be called an "educated person," (given by 67 respondents); and (4) Knowledge essential for advanced study, (given by 38 respondents). Respondents offered one to three reasons; all responses are recorded above. All these responses are very general in nature. When probed for more specificity, respondents typically stated: "The goals are general, so the definitions need to be equally vague" or "These are such commonly accepted reasons, hardly anyone expects an in-depth explanation." These comments may reflect what many colleagues believe or they may reflect an absence of thorough thinking through the reasons for and the efficacy of universal course requirements. Neither reflection is adequate or satisfying.

A well rounded education; a truly educated person; possession of requisite knowledge for advanced studies; and meeting the general demands expected of a college student expressed by educators, members of the business world, and taxpaying citizens (for public institutions) and endowers (for private schools) are all august goals; however, it stretches credulity when each school's definition of these outcomes is singularly different from all other schools' definitions. Colleges and universities sharing common overall missions: (research, comprehensive, or liberal arts), similar size, common geography, and even in the same state or state university system do not even share common core requirements or common rationales for these universal student required courses. Such lack of consensus leads me to question that any of us have methodically and adequately come to a wise, compelling, and therefore sharable set of universal course requirements.

For our academic institutions to insist that they are positioned to fathom what is needed to be a "well rounded" or a "truly educated" person sounds pompous. Genuine claims to know what is needed to succeed in advanced work would be credible if professional and graduate schools had admission standards requiring a similar or identical set of admission requirements. Such is not the case. "What 'every-one' expects of a college student" is

gross over generalization beyond any utility. It seems no really sound rationale was offered by 114 higher education teachers for a ubiquitous, albeit idiosyncratic, system of universal course requirements.

One of my student's questions concerning and challenging our institution's rigid, specific history course requirement stimulated my pursuing this subject. She, a college sophomore, had taken, for her own interest at another college during the past summer, two rather specialized courses: a history of science course and a Chinese literature class. Our university accepted both courses as electives and still required her to fulfill a one course core history requirement and a one course core literature mandate.

The student methodically approached the chairpersons of the history and English departments respectively concerning: (1) whether or not the relevant core requirement could be waived in lieu of the course she had received 'A's in from a school governed by the same Board of Regents as was our school; and (2) what the philosophic/pedagogic rationale for such a requirement for all students was. She received similar answers to both the questions from both chairmen. Her requirements would not be waived or substituted. She was informed that such requirements were in the interest of assuring "all students are commonly grounded" in literature and history.

My student posed more probing questions to me: questions that troubled me because I had too few respectable answers and because they cogently took to task the general rationale for universal course requirements piously claimed by so many of my colleagues. Following are some of the more revealing and well thought out question my students posed. Is it more important that I take a general, uninteresting [to me] course in this area than to have taken a rigorous, highly interesting [to me] course and to have earned superior grades? Is it the taking of specific courses that the core is designed for or is it [in my case] to learn history and literature? Would an honors student from a prestigious university having taken planetary astronomy or another student coming from another highly respected and demanding college who took meteorology be told they have not met basic science class requirements at our school? If yes, isn't it foolish to deny recognition of nationally reputed schools offering internationally recognized science courses; and if the answer is no, wouldn't that constitute discipline prejudice against my situation by the school? These questions go beyond the "core" but they show how intellectually shallow some rationales and practices vis-à-vis core requirements seem to be.

Another student, having conversed with his classmates and sensing I had an interest in the topic, posed another vexing philosophic and pragmatic thought. He, a soon to be graduating senior who had been accepted elsewhere to graduate school, asked: "How is it that a respected academic institution can impose on all of its undergraduate students specific and rigorous core requirements and then accept without specific comment or expected deficiency requirements students from other schools who have not met that school's clearly defined universal course requirements? This student pointed out a perplexing dilemma: Is the university that accepts "deficiently educated" students from other schools diluting their graduate student pool? Is the graduate degree granting school deceiving its undergraduate students by claiming certain undergraduate courses to be necessary but then accepting, without penalty, students who have not taken these courses from other schools? This student showed me his unconditional graduate program acceptance statement, his transcript of courses, and that college's undergraduate catalog showing he had not met that institution's complete core requirements. This student was painfully aware of academic hypocrisy; a condition that raised serious doubts in both our minds about the integrity of universal course core requirements.

Doubts are not the sole province of student inquiry and challenge. The second question asked in my informal colleague survey: are there purposes for the core that are commonly unspoken and unpublished? The answers to this question were varied and raised even more doubts as to the nobility, the usefulness, and to the ethics of universal course requirements. The answers to this second survey question were: (1) the core serves as a means of justifying or guaranteeing faculty positions (given by 83 respondents); (2) specific core requirements represent "power plays" between institutional political entities [disciplinary hegemony, one upmanship, and departmental "equity" were often cited here], (given by 76 respondents); (3) the core offers institutions and ways to reward, promote, or highlight educational innovation and trends (given by 20 respondents); (4) the core allows a school to demonstrate it is changing with the times (given by 17 respondents); (5) the core reflects institutional supporters' demands (given by 14 respondents); (6) the core mirrors general public expectations (given by 11 respondents); and (7) the core, in part, represents political concessions to accrediting agencies (given by 3 respondents). Respondents all gave from two to four responses to this question. The variety and frequency of answers suggest that the publicly forwarded rationales are suspect; too many participants admit to covert and embarrassing reasons why core

requirements are imposed on students. Of the 114 respondents to my survey, the vast majority admitted to having participated in the core producing, changing, or "strengthening" or "weakening" processes. They were involved in the core issue, not just observers of it.

If this second set of explanations for the universal course requirements for students even approaches validity, it condemns the core to absurdity, academic deception, and an unprofessional concern for our students' welfare. We, as members of the professorate, owe it to ourselves, our institutions, our profession, to our students, and to the people paying the high cost of a college education to rethink the core -- What is it? What should it be? How is it best formed? There are some very basic questions that ought not take a long time to debate and which should be answered openly, honestly, and without equivocation. Among these questions are the following:

1. Should college students master a foreign language? If so, to what minimal level?
2. Should college students learn about science, actually do science, or both? Just what constitutes doing science?
3. Should college students acquire intercultural, interethnic, and/or inter-racial awareness/competence? If so, just what do these terms mean?
4. Should college students learn U.S. history, state history, world history? How much of each is minimally expected?
5. Should college students be mathematically and statistically competent? At what minimal level?
6. Should college students learn about art, do art, or both? Just what constitutes doing art. Do performing arts (theatre, music, choral, opera, dance, etc.) all apply? Do literary and visual arts equally apply?
7. Should college students master skills of good citizenship? If so, what are these skills and how are they best acquired?
8. Should college students master competent writing skills? How should this mastery be measured?
9. Should college students master critical thinking skills? If so, just what are these skills and how are they best mastered?

These are not exhaustive questions; however, they suggest a basis for genuine and honest dialogue about the need for, the desire for, and eventually, the form for a truly defensible, sharable, and proudly proclaimed set of universal course requirements.

I have served at six institutions of higher education in four states in three national regions as a student and faculty member. I served on various curriculum committees and rarely have I heard such questions raised and even

less often have I heard them answered directly and forthrightly. The college professorate serve a noble cause; we need to assure that our charges are treated honestly and with care and dignity. Our present hodge-podge of core requirements make a mockery of the term "universal" expectations. We must rectify this situation before we are forced into arbitrary action by well meaning but intrusive outsiders backed up by an ever expanding legal system and before we lose our cherished profession's legitimacy to define what a quality education is for our nation's youth. Local school, state, and regional provincialism over curriculum matters no longer is adequate nor is it acceptable. Mobility and McLuhan's global village insight forces us to come to a common agreement on basic terms and goals. We must act now or face horrible consequences for our stubbornness, parochialism, or petty bickering.