

Chapter 2

Restructuring Core Curriculum

Julie Christina Tatlock
Mount Mary University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores major themes surrounding restructuring core curriculum in higher education. The current climate in higher education might seem hostile to innovations in core curriculum. There are numerous barriers to such efforts at all levels from instruction to upper administration. Despite the challenges, this is a propitious moment to reflect on what the academy considers to be the body of knowledge everyone should have. While there will not be one answer for every institution, there are a number of best practices that can ensure a robust curriculum that benefits both students and institutions.

RESTRUCTURING CORE CURRICULUM: WHY NOW?

This is a perilous time for higher education. All colleges and universities face the impending demographic cliff, and some have already closed their doors due to declining enrollment. For years, the message has been that budget cuts, often in the form of tenure-track faculty lines, are necessary to ensure future survival. Disheartening as it has been to watch such measures, there is something deeper and darker at play. When people find out that I am a university History professor, they love to pepper me with questions; sometimes about the things they find most interesting in the past. A favorite question is, “If you could go back to any civilization, where would you go?” My response, “Nowhere without indoor plumbing and penicillin.” More often now, I am asked a more serious question, “Where we are we headed?” I have no answer, of course, to this esoteric and teleological question. In the doom and gloom and today’s world, I am also often asked, “Where or when did we go

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wrong?” My answer is the always the same. “When we had to convince people that knowledge was good.”

Decades of sustained attacks on critical thinking and the liberal arts have succeeded in convincing people that all one needs is a good google search or an instructional video and they can become experts in anything. It would be wrong to dismiss that idea out of hand. We have all used these methods to figure out a problem with our cars, to fix a computer issue, or to find a remedy for an illness. There is a fatal flaw in this thinking: What about the idea that comes next? The culmination of a good education and choosing an expertise is not simply to make money or to win trivia night. The end of a good education is the beginning of the next great creative endeavor. Building a body of knowledge is not the end but the beginning of innovation.

Traditionally, universities have relied on core curriculum to expose students to a broad body of knowledge to anchor their studies and prepare them to meet the world. The strength of a liberal arts education to build competencies across fields, create a solid foundational knowledge of how the world works, and provide modern work skills remains a major selling point for colleges and universities. As one report for the National Endowment of the Humanities stated, “It is through the curriculum that colleges and university faculties establish a design for education. It is through the curriculum that they communicate what it is an educated person should know” (Cheney, 1998). The author of the report, Chairman of the NEH, Lynne Cheney, went on to tout the need for cross-disciplinary education saying that the “National Endowment for the Humanities must be concerned with the literature major who has no understanding of physics as well as the engineer who graduates without studying history. Both are less prepared than they should be to make the subtle and complex choices today’s life demands” (Cheney, 1998). Exposure to different disciplines ensure a cross pollination of ideas and encourages students to make connections.

So, what happened to commitment to a core education? At some institutions, nothing at all. In fact, at elite schools, core remains robust as does the encouragement of students to major in traditional, liberal arts fields. What seems to be happening is messaging to non-elite students that such academic pursuits as philosophy, history, art, or literature are not “useful” as they do not directly lead to careers. This is unconscionable. Not only is it a lie as majors in history and literature find meaningful work that offers financial stability, but it also reeks of the idea that some knowledge belongs only to a small few. This runs in direct opposition to goal of education in democratic societies. There might be a point in warning students about pursuing graduate degrees in these fields as jobs in higher education are not what they used to be, but a solid undergraduate degree in the liberal arts remains a path to success.

There are those who will blame a concerted attack on critical thinking by people in positions of power who would benefit from a population unable to discern the

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