A New Consensus for Undergraduate Education: Can We Get There from Here?

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Abstract

Business executives, government leaders and educators concerned with undergraduate curriculum are converging on a set of college outcomes necessary for success in the global society of the twenty-first century. Yet moving postsecondary education toward a curriculum that embraces these outcomes has proven difficult. The preoccupations of faculty members, the American system of courses and credits, demand for easy transfer, the nature of state-imposed requirements and high school graduates' poor understanding of the essential purposes of undergraduate education all seem to stand in the way. Some state system and institutional strategies, however, show promise for breaking the logjam.

Even *Time* gets it. In a December 18, 2006 feature story focused on high schools, the article's authors list as the essential "twenty-first century skills": "knowing more about the world," "thinking outside the box," "becoming smarter about new sources of information," and "developing good people skills." The centrality of these skills is attested to by business as well as educational leaders.

The article could just as well have been talking about the kind of twenty-first century education being urged for college undergraduates by the National Center for Education and the Economy in their recent report, "Tough Choices or Tough Times" and, for nearly ten years, by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). The latter, in a long series of publications, especially "Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College," places heavy emphasis on these same skills, along with written and oral communication skills, quantitative literacy, inquiry and analysis, and ethical reasoning and action, and the broad knowledge necessary to exercise these capacities.

Yet even as such a moderate publication as *Time* has reached a clear understanding of the need to think in new ways about the education of all Americans, the great bulk of both K-12 and baccalaureate education in the United States seems unable to break out of curricular and instructional modes that were established in the 1950s and earlier. Most high school instruction is organized into a six- or seven-period day, with curricular content defined predominantly by subject matter knowledge. As the *Time* article notes, high school textbooks "tend to gallop through a mind-numbing stream of topics and sub-topics," in contrast to the practice of teaching a few basic concepts very well, a practice characteristic of more educationally successful nations.

Much the same might be said of undergraduate education in which disciplinary subject matter—as opposed to intellectual skills development—tends to control the curriculum, textbooks are, if anything, fatter than those used in high schools, and instruction by lecture and instructor-focused discussion are the dominant instructional modes. The United States' unique system of courses and credits, while it works superbly well to support student mobility, fractionates students' educational programs and leaves them with a collection of courses lacking coherence and clear intentionality.

The absence of a concerted national movement in the directions being urged by the reformers is not the result of ineffective or implausible rationales. To focus now on undergraduate education, many faculty members and academic administrators readily acknowledge the plausibility and importance of the detailed and well-supported rationales of AAC&U and others of their persuasion, including many of the accrediting associations, both regional and specialized. These urgings are consistently supported by employers. Data recently gathered by Peter D. Hart Research Associates on behalf of AAC&U show particular concern that new employees possess skills of teamwork, critical thinking, and oral and written communication, along with an awareness of new developments in science and technology. Global awareness, information literacy and creative problem-solving abilities reach almost equal levels of urgency.

Curriculum and instruction organized to stress these twenty-first century skills are not without champions on most campuses. Nearly every institution that offers undergraduate education has a group of faculty members and academic administrators anxious to move to a program organized in ways that develop these skills and capacities. Some, IUPUI (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis) among them, have in fact created such a curriculum. Why, then, with several models available at every kind of institution does it seem to be so difficult to move the twenty-first century undergraduate education agenda forward everywhere?

Apart from the familiar inertia—or to put it in a more kindly way, caution—of academia, the difficulty that higher education in general experiences in making transformational curricular change is systemic. Curricular practice is deeply entangled in the structure of disciplines, the system of courses and credits, and the institutional transfer policies and state regulatory practices that are based on individual courses and the academic monetary unit we call the credit hour.

Beyond these systemic problems lies the difficulty institutions have in describing expected undergraduate outcomes and expected learning in individual courses in any but the most general terms. This vagueness makes conversation with high school counterparts about college expectations marginally fruitful. Thus the work of P-16 groups to foster a relatively "seamless" transition from high school to college, with high school graduates clear about and prepared to meet collegiate standards, have in general failed to move beyond efforts to reach common understandings about proficiency in written communication and mathematical knowledge. And these are the easiest proficiencies to define!

We need to examine each of these factors in turn to see how, taken together, they form a massive drag on the transformation of undergraduate education to meet the contemporary needs of our communities, the nation, the world and, most importantly, each individual student.

Why College Faculty Members are College Faculty Members

It would be difficult to find a college faculty member who chose that career primarily to teach students to communicate effectively, reason critically and deal with unstructured problems. They chose to make a life in academia because they love the subject matter they profess. Many come to appreciate the role they play in fostering student intellectual and moral development, but most remain wedded to their disciplines and the specific subject matter they have chosen to study. When asked about outcomes for their courses and for the curricula of which those courses are a part, they will vigorously assert that their responsibility is to help students learn as much about the content of the instructors' subject fields as possible.

Most faculty members are not particularly interested in talking to their colleagues about how their courses relate to those of others, except in those few cases, mostly in mathematics and science, where courses are sequential. If courses meet a specific general education requirement, individual instructors' understanding of or concern for the expectations associated with that requirement may be vague or the requirement's intentions minimally attended to.

Everyone is familiar with the deterioration of awareness of the purposes of particular requirements over time. By the fourth or fifth year of a new general education program, the instructors who designed a new kind of course with quite specific purposes have moved on. The new instructors, never having been immersed in the rationale, have only a vague notion of what the requirement is expected to accomplish. If, as is often the case, many of the instructors are adjuncts or graduate teaching fellows, they have had little explanation of the ends to which the course is to be taught. The result is students baffled about why they have to take the course and how it fits into their own or the faculty's expectations.

An obvious solution to this problem is systematic training for faculty members coming new to a particular course. Some institutions require that instructors about to teach a key general education course sit through that course with an experienced instructor in the semester before they teach it for the first time. Others conduct a seminar of several weeks for new instructors. Still others hold annual retreats to renew understandings of purpose. On most campuses, however, academic leaders feel that they cannot make these kinds of demands on either full-time faculty members or adjunct instructors or do not wish to devote funds to creating the circumstances for such training and renewal. At research-intensive institutions, taking faculty members away from laboratory, library and studio for such purposes is strongly resisted.

Courses and Credits. The American system of measuring progress toward a degree by counting individual courses, each bearing a specified number of credit hours, is a superb method of academic bookkeeping. The academic monetary unit of course credits makes possible the exercise of typically American individualism by facilitating the massive movement of students among institutions as each person's changing needs and ambitions dictate. Credit hours also define graduation requirements, faculty work loads and institutional funding formulas. The idea of individual courses is intimately tied to such pervasive operations as national testing companies and the textbook industry.

Unfortunately, this system has a number of serious side effects. Since credit hours are defined in terms of time spent in class, students are tempted to think about learning simply as an accumulation of credits as opposed to having achieved certain learning goals. Since their programs consist of individual courses whose purposes are unrelated to any well-defined goal, whatever coherence their education may be intended to have is dissipated.

Structuring higher education in terms of courses and credits does not in and of itself lead to curricular incoherence, unclear purpose and lack of coordinated effort among instructors, but it certainly works against it. Since courses are defined in terms of subject matter content, the contribution of each to developing the general intellectual skills that should be the hallmark of undergraduate education is seldom at the forefront of instructors' thinking. The isolation of one course from another gives faculty members little reason to talk to each other about what they are doing and to help students make connections across courses.

Indeed, misplaced notions of academic freedom cause some faculty members to object to the idea that teaching a course that meets a particular requirement carries with it an obligation to teach to the purposes of the requirement. Mistaken concepts of faculty autonomy thus thwart efforts to realize a curriculum that has coherence of subject matter, let alone systematic development of skills of communication, critical thinking or the skills of dealing with unstructured problems.

Given the prevalence of an undergraduate education based on individual courses and the accumulation of credits, a strong defense against incoherence lies in academic advising that helps students understand the larger purposes of their education and seek out the experiences that promote intellectual growth. Advising that simply helps students understand what is required of them rather than why it is required is quite insufficient. Students need advisors who not only understand the principles on which the curriculum is based but also the ability to help them construct a program that promotes their intellectual growth and sense of human purpose. If an undergraduate curriculum founded in developing the intellectual skills and capacities for success in a twenty-first century global society is to become the norm, both student and faculty understanding of advising and its purposes will have to change.

A second line of defense is a strong program of outcomes assessment. Assessment forces the institution to define its purposes, develop responsive strategies for

determining that students are achieving those purposes, and develop curriculum and instruction that will allow students to succeed. An appropriate assessment program enforces attention to the curriculum as a whole and to connection and continuity. It requires that instructors talk to and coordinate with each other.

Strong advising and assessment have the further benefit of letting the students understand the thinking of the faculty in designing their programs. Most students have never had an explanation and thus do not understand the rationale of the educational enterprise in which they are involved. Like the Light Brigade in Tennyson's poem, "Theirs not to reason why,/Theirs but to do or die." Students should not have to ask, "Why do I have to take this course?" They should have frequent and full explanations of the reasons for requirements and accessible places they can go to for written explanations in the times in between. The disconnections and incoherence inherent in our system of courses and credits require such attention to public statements of rationale as well as the internal processes of advising and assessment.

Student Transfer. According to the massive research on student college attendance and course-taking patterns conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 60 percent of students earning bachelor's degrees have completed 12 or more credits at an institution other than the one from which they graduate. Many, of course, have completed a good deal more work than that and in about 20 percent of the cases at more than one institution other than the one that ultimately awards the bachelor's degree. This ability of students to move in and out of higher education as their circumstances warrant and to seek instruction under the conditions that fit their needs is highly advantageous. Those credit hours make it all possible.

But this mobility has its costs. It rests on the assumption that every three-credit course with the same title and covering roughly the same subject matter is equivalent to every other three-credit course with the same characteristics. Never mind that one American history course asks no more of students than to memorize certain facts while another with the same title and covering the same period inquires deeply into questions of interpretation or standards of evidence. For purposes of transfer, the two courses are the same. Indeed, state legislators start to get agitated if public institutions do not treat them identically, while private institutions that get too particular about equivalence of purpose start to lose transfer students on whom their enrollments may depend.

The convenient fiction of course equivalence makes it hard for institutions that enroll large numbers of transfer students or prepare students for transfer to maintain well integrated programs with unique features. Two-year colleges must offer courses that will transfer to as wide a range of institutions as possible, which generally dictates a "plain vanilla" curriculum. Four-year institutions may develop a carefully coordinated program, but must compromise the principles of that program in order to accommodate transfer students. Thus half or more of their graduates will not have experienced fully the particular modes of instruction or configurations of subject matter of their signature baccalaureate programs.

Some general understanding within the academic world about the set of skills and awarenesses that students are expected to develop in the undergraduate years would go a long way toward mitigating this problem. The likelihood of any kind of even semi-formal agreement about the nature, content and standards of undergraduate education is vanishingly small, given the diversity of American higher education. The pipe dream of a common assessment of collegiate outcomes, never a particularly good idea, seems to melt away on close inspection, even for its most enthusiastic advocates. However, it is perhaps not too much to hope that an implicit agreement about the purposes of undergraduate education, couched in terms of the twenty-first century skills set described earlier, can take hold.

State Regulation. Such consensus as does exist may be found in state regulation. All but ten states require institutions offering a baccalaureate degree to include in their programs a minimum general education requirement, mostly in the range of 30-42 credits. These requirements all include work in English composition, mathematics and a distribution requirement of varying extent in the areas of science, social science, humanities and arts. Individual states may impose additional requirements, such as a course in American cultural diversity or oral communication or information technology. This consensus is crude and based in the curricular thinking of the 1950s and is for the most part couched in terms of subject matters. In only a handful of cases does the statement of the regulation offer any rationale for the requirements, the assumption apparently being that it is self-evident. Even fewer states indicate what intellectual purposes the courses in each category are intended to foster.

The Colorado Commission on Higher Education has instituted a more responsive structure. Regulations specify five "competency areas" (critical thinking, written communication, technology, reading and mathematics) along with the five "content areas." Courses in the content areas must address appropriate competencies, the two kinds of requirements cross-cutting. These requirements are enforced by a state-level approval process for each course proposed for "state-guaranteed student transfer." The Illinois Articulation Initiative, which served as the model for Colorado, is similar in its structure but somewhat less formal.

Another way of approaching the same consensus at the state level is the assessment regime established by the State Council for Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV), the state's SHEEO (State Higher Education Executive Officers). SCHEV requires the public institutions which it coordinates to conduct and report the results of outcome assessments in six areas: written communication, oral communication, technology and information literacy, quantitative reasoning, scientific reasoning, and critical thinking. Institutions may use whatever instruments and specific outcome criteria they wish, but they are all focused on a set of intellectual competencies that are largely the same as those of the twenty-first century skill set.

The states, then, would seem to provide an appropriate locus for initiatives that move higher education toward the new consensus it needs. Given the manageable numbers of the SHEEO membership and the broad reach of each state's coordinating/governing

body, a concerted effort at reaching general agreement on undergraduate outcomes seems possible, if difficult. However, the legally weak position in which many states have put their coordinating or governing boards is a distinct handicap.

High School-College Coordination. The groups that have issued reports exhorting high schools to prepare students better for college are legion. From the Commission on No Child Left Behind to the National Governor's Association, organizations of public officials and business people (and occasionally educators) have lamented the disappointing results of secondary education for many students. The statements cite the large percentage of college students in remedial programs, the length of time it takes them to graduate, the numbers who begin degree programs but never finish, and standards for high school graduation that are too low to make graduates effective in the twenty-first century workplace.

The problem is that none of these reports, other than that of the National Center on Education and the Economy, say specifically what students should be able to do when they get to college other than read, write and do mathematics at a level that allows them to proceed with "college-level" work. Some, such as the National Governors Association, have urged the offering of more advanced courses in high schools, including Advanced Placement and courses offered by local colleges but what such work should prepare students to do is left vague.

The national P-16 movement, working with the Education Trust and with substantial funding from both public and private sources, has been addressing the problem of smooth high-school-to-college transition for a decade. So far, the work has focused largely on adequate basic skills preparation that will obviate much of the developmental work that colleges must undertake. However, the many conversations at local and state levels between high school and college faculties, intended to clarify and specify what kind and level of skills colleges need in first year students, have seldom reached resolution. Initiatives such as that in Oregon to align high school graduation requirements and college admission requirements have led to agreement about substance but have proven difficult to implement.

So as the national leadership becomes increasingly agitated about access to college with the preparation necessary to graduate in a reasonable period of time, few of these same groups are asking the next logical question, "Access to what?" What skills and capacities other than "readin', writin', and 'rithmetic" do students need when they come to college?

Here again, colleges have had trouble articulating a set of skills and awarenesses that students should have. In part, this difficulty is a function of many institutions' lack of clarity about their own outcome expectations and development of a curriculum and teaching strategies unambiguously directed to those goals. Until baccalaureate programs reach clarity about their goals, their expectations for incoming students are likely to remain vague.

If students could at least be clear about the differences between high school and collegiate educational styles, they might fare better and proceed more quickly. One might think that secondary school teachers, themselves being college graduates, could prepare students for the differences they will encounter, beyond the fact that they will be expected to work independently. They should be able to convey the understanding that undergraduate education is characteristically about developing skills of inquiry, analysis and synthesis. Too many, however, are not particularly thoughtful about the purposes of their own educations beyond the purely instrumental and thus have neither the concepts nor the language to describe them. Those in teacher education are hardly alone in this, since most bachelor's degree programs do little about articulating their aims to students.

Not only should high school graduates know how college differs from their prior educational experience, they should have at least some practice with work that requires more than understanding the meaning of words on a page, doing science experiments by the book, and performing mathematical operations that follow the example problems in the text. While many high schools, notably the members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, feature wonderfully creative programs that involve students in "higher order thinking skills" such as inquiry and problem-solving, most students have too little and too elementary experience of this sort.

If students and their parents could hear this message about expectations directly from the colleges and from respected people in their communities, new college entrants might at the very least come to their undergraduate educations with some idea of what to expect and perhaps having made sure they have the preparation to make a smooth transition. Higher education institutions should be able to see the advantage of having students come to them with an understanding of what baccalaureate education is about in the global century—and perhaps always has been. Working with school systems to create forums to convey an understanding of collegiate purposes is a comparatively easy and inexpensive way to enhance the chances of an academically more responsive and successful student body.

Urban institutions, both two-year and four-year, have a particularly good opportunity here. Since they draw many of their students from a single large city school system, concerted programs to reach students and their parents with messages about what to expect in college and how to prepare for it can have substantial payoff. Students in these urban systems have a particular need for such clarification, since the great majority otherwise have no one in their lives who can provide it.

Many institutions now work with local schools to help students assess their readiness in reading, writing and mathematics. Getting beyond the focus on basic skills to give students a feel for the kind of analytic and critical capacities undergraduate education will call on them to develop will do much to enhance student success. Needless to say, the institutions will have to get their own house in order first by clarifying their own understanding of the broad goals of their curricula and making sure that their practices match their intentions.

Bill Plater's strong, patient leadership over nearly a quarter of a century has made IUPUI a national model for how to get an institution's house in order and what being in order means. The university's "Principles of Undergraduate Learning" clearly reflect the purposes of a contemporary undergraduate education: communicating effectively, understanding the nature and value of various ways of knowing, maturing skills of critical analysis and problem-solving, learning to understand people with diverse life experiences, developing moral and ethical reasoning capacities. Concerted, purposeful work to match instruction to these goals is—and always will be—ongoing. IUPUI's faculty, though divided into some 15 colleges and programs, has come to a common understanding and acceptance of threads of institutional purpose that run through all of undergraduate education and is finding ways to make them strong and visible. Achieving that common understanding in a large urban university, with widely dispersed faculty members holding many different views of their roles is no mean feat. Reaching the necessary understandings and engendering willingness to implement them requires first a vision and the courage to articulate it, assembling a leadership team of like-minded people, and showing faculty members with varying interests and priorities how they can incorporate the large vision into their individual work. Attaining this outcome is the work of years of concerted advocacy, patient explanation, and principled compromise that never strays from the essential character of the initial vision.

IUPUI is living proof that, despite barriers to change that have thwarted many institutions, you can get there from here. Bill Plater and the many outstanding faculty members and administrators he has recruited to the task have created an undergraduate program that stands as a significant example of what can be accomplished with sustained, purposeful effort. It is an honor to be part of the tribute to that accomplishment.

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