

# Our Compassless Colleges

---

 [hoover.org/research/our-compassless-colleges](http://hoover.org/research/our-compassless-colleges)

At universities and colleges throughout the land, undergraduates and their parents pay large sums of money for -- and federal and state governments contribute sizeable tax exemptions to support -- "liberal" education...

Wednesday, September 5, 2007 By: Peter Berkowitz

At universities and colleges throughout the land, undergraduates and their parents pay large sums of money for -- and federal and state governments contribute sizeable tax exemptions to support -- "liberal" education. This despite administrators and faculty lacking, or failing to honor, a coherent concept of what constitutes an educated human being.

To be sure, American higher education, or rather a part of it, is today the envy of the world, producing and maintaining research scientists of the highest caliber. But liberal education is another matter. Indeed, many professors in the humanities and social sciences proudly promulgate doctrines that mock the very idea of a standard or measure defining an educated person, and so legitimate the compassless curriculum over which they preside. In these circumstances, why should we not conclude that universities are betraying their mission?

Many American colleges do adopt general distribution requirements. Usually this means that students must take a course or two of their choosing in the natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities, decorated perhaps with a dollop of fine arts, rudimentary foreign-language exposure, and the acquisition of basic writing and quantitative skills. And all students must choose a major. But this veneer of structure provides students only superficial guidance. Or, rather, it reinforces the lesson that our universities have little of substance to say about the essential knowledge possessed by an educated person.

Certainly this was true of the core curriculum at Harvard, where I taught in the faculty of arts and sciences during the 1990s. And it remains true even after Harvard's recent reforms.

Harvard's aims and aspirations are in many ways admirable. According to this year's Report of the Task Force on General Education, Harvard understands liberal education as "an education conducted in a spirit of free inquiry undertaken without concern for topical relevance or vocational utility." It prepares for the rest of life by improving students' ability "to assess empirical claims, interpret cultural expression, and confront ethical dilemmas in their personal and professional lives." But instead of concentrating on teaching substantive knowledge, the general education at Harvard will focus on *why* what students learn is important. To accomplish this, Harvard would require students to take single-semester courses in eight categories: Aesthetic and Interpretive Understanding, Culture and Belief, Empirical Reasoning, Ethical Reasoning, Science of Living Systems, Science of the Physical Universe, Societies of the World, and The United States in the World.

Unfortunately, the new requirements add up to little more than an attractively packaged evasion of the university's responsibility to provide a coherent core for undergraduate education. For starters, though apparently not part of the general education curriculum, Harvard requires only a year of foreign language study or the equivalent. Yet since it usually takes more than a year of college study to achieve competence in a foreign language -- the ability to hold a conversation and read a newspaper -- doesn't Harvard, by requiring only a single year, denigrate foreign-language study, and with it the serious study of other cultures and societies?

Furthermore, in the search for the immediate relevance it disavows, Harvard's curriculum repeatedly puts the cart before the horse. For example, instead of first requiring students to concentrate on the study of novels, poetry, and plays, Harvard will ask them to choose from a variety of courses on "literary or religious texts, paintings, sculpture, architecture, music, film, dance, decorative arts" that involve "exploring theoretical and philosophical issues concerning the production and reception of meanings and the formation of aesthetic judgment."

Instead of first requiring students to gain acquaintance with the history of opinions about law, justice, government, duty and virtue, Harvard will ask them to choose from a variety of courses on how to bring ethical theories to bear on contemporary moral and political dilemmas. Instead of first requiring students to survey U.S. history or European history or classical history, Harvard will ask them to choose from a variety of courses that examine the U.S and its relation to the rest of the world. Instead of first teaching students about the essential features of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Harvard will ask them to choose from a variety of courses on almost any aspect of foreign societies.

Harvard's general education reform will allow students to graduate without ever having read the same book or studied the same material. Students may take away much of interest, but it is the little in common they learn that will be of lasting significance. For they will absorb the implicit teaching of the new college curriculum -- same as the old one -- that there is nothing in particular that an educated person need know.

Of course, if parents, students, alumni donors, trustees, professors and administrators are happy, why worry? A college degree remains a hot commodity, a ticket of entry to valuable social networks, a signal to employers that graduates have achieved a certain proficiency in manipulating concepts, performing computations, and getting along with peers.

The reason to worry is that university education can cause lasting harm. The mental habits that students form and the ideas they absorb in college consolidate the framework through which as adults they interpret experience, and judge matters to be true or false, fair or inequitable, honorable or dishonorable. A university that fails to teach students sound mental habits and to acquaint them with enduring ideas handicaps its graduates for public and private life.

Moreover, properly conceived, a liberal education provides invaluable benefits for students and the nation. For most students, it offers the last chance, perhaps until retirement, to read widely and deeply, to acquire knowledge of the opinions and events that formed them and the nation in which they live, and to study other peoples and cultures. A proper liberal education liberalizes in the old-fashioned and still most relevant sense: It forms individuals fit for freedom.

The nation benefits as well, because a liberal democracy presupposes an informed citizenry capable of distinguishing the public interest from private interest, evaluating consequences, and discerning the claims of justice and the opportunities for -- and limits to -- realizing it in politics. Indeed, a sprawling liberal democracy whose citizens practice different religions and no religion at all, in which individuals have family heritages that can be traced to every continent, and in which the nation's foreign affairs are increasingly bound up with local politics in countries around the world is particularly dependent on citizens acquiring a liberal education.

Crafting a core consistent with the imperatives of a liberal education will involve both a substantial break with today's university curriculum and a long overdue alignment of higher education with common sense. Such a core would, for example, require all students to take semester courses surveying Greek and Roman history, European history, and American history. It would require all students to take a semester course in classic works of European literature, and one in classic works of American literature. It would require all students to take a semester course in biology and one in physics. It would require all students to take a semester course in the principles of American government; one in economics; and one in the history of political philosophy. It would require all students to take a semester course comparing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It would require all students to take a semester course of their choice in the history, literature or religion of a non-Western civilization. And it would require all students to demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language of their choice by carrying on a casual conversation and accurately reading a newspaper in the language, a level of proficiency usually obtainable after two years of college study, or four semester courses.

Such a core is at best an introduction to liberal education. Still, students who meet its requirements will acquire a common intellectual foundation that enables them to debate morals and politics responsibly, enhances their understanding of whatever specialization they choose, and enriches their appreciation of the multiple dimensions of the delightful and dangerous world in which we live.

It is a mark of the politicization and clutter of our current curriculum that these elementary requirements will strike many faculty and administrators as benighted and onerous. Yet the core I've outlined reflects what all successful individuals outside of academia know: Progress depends on mastering the basics.

Assuming four courses a semester and 32 to graduate, such a core could be completed in the first two years of undergraduate study. Students who met the foreign-language requirement through high school study would have the opportunity as freshman and sophomores to choose four elective courses. During their junior and senior year, students could devote 10 courses to their major while taking six additional elective courses. And students majoring in the natural sciences, where it is necessary to take a substantial sequence of courses, would enroll in introductory and lower-level courses in their major during freshman and sophomore years and complete the core during junior and senior years.

Admittedly, reform confronts formidable obstacles. The major one is professors. Many will fight such a common core, because it requires them to teach general interest classes outside their area of expertise; it reduces opportunities to teach small boutique classes on highly specialized topics; and it presupposes that knowledge is cumulative and that some books and ideas are more essential than others.

Meanwhile, students and parents are poorly positioned to affect change. Students come and go, and, in any event, the understanding they need to formulate the arguments for reform is acquired through the very liberal education of which universities are currently depriving them. Meanwhile, parents are too distant and dispersed, and often they have too much money on the line to rock the boat.

But there are opportunities. Change could be led by an intrepid president, provost or dean of a major university who knows the value of a liberal education, possesses the eloquence and courage to defend it to his or her faculty, and has the skill to refashion institutional incentives and hold faculty and administrators accountable.

Reform could also be led by trustees at private universities -- the election in recent years of T.J. Rodgers, Todd Zywicki, Peter Robinson and Stephen Smith to the Dartmouth Board of Trustees on platforms supporting freedom of speech and high academic standards is a start - or by alumni determined to connect their donations, on which universities depend, to reliable promises that their gifts will be used in furtherance of liberal education, well understood.

And some enterprising smaller colleges or public universities, taking advantage of the nation's love of diversity and openness to innovation, might discover a market niche for parents and students eager for an education that serves students' best interests by introducing them in a systematic manner to their own civilization, to the moral and political principles on which their nation is based, and to languages and civilizations that differ from their own.

Citizens today are called on to analyze a formidable array of hard questions concerning war and peace, liberty and security, markets and morals, marriage and family, science and technology, poverty and public responsibility, and much more. No citizen can be expected to

master all the issues. But liberal democracies count on more than a small minority acquiring the ability to reason responsibly about the many sides of these many-sided questions. For this reason, we must teach our universities to appreciate the aims of a liberal education. And we must impress upon our universities their obligation to pursue them responsibly.

***Mr. Berkowitz, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, teaches at George Mason University School of Law. This commentary draws from an essay that previously appeared in Policy Review.***