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Since its establishment in 1974, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges has periodically examined two-year college liberal arts curricula, including course offerings in the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences. In its most recent study, Center staff analyzed the Spring 1986 class schedules of 95 randomly selected two-year

institutions to determine the types of liberal arts courses offered by the colleges and to spot changes in the curriculum since the completion of similar studies in 1975, 1977, 1978, and 1983. This ERIC Digest draws upon the 1986 study to examine the status of the liberal arts curriculum, focusing on (1) the types of courses most frequently offered, (2) the stability of the curriculum over time, and (3) the structure of the curriculum in terms of introductory versus advanced classes.

COURSE OFFERINGS IN THE LIBERAL ARTS

In the curriculum study, Center staff counted the class sections offered in each of several disciplines within the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. Findings reveal that the disciplines were distributed as follows:

oo The humanities made up 48 percent of the total liberal arts curriculum. English composition was the humanities discipline with the greatest number of class sections, followed (in order of relative magnitude) by the fine and performing arts, foreign language, history, literature, art history, philosophy, music appreciation, cultural anthropology, and interdisciplinary humanities.

oo The sciences made up 43 percent of all liberal arts class sections. Mathematics (including computer science) was the largest discipline within the sciences, followed (in order of relative magnitude) by psychology, biology, engineering chemistry, physics, agriculture, earth and space science, and environmental sciences.

oo the social sciences made up only eight percent of total liberal arts classes. Sociology was the largest social science discipline, followed by economics, political science, and interdisciplinary social science.

oo Together, mathematics and English composition made up 41

percent of all liberal arts courses. The large number of

class sections devoted to these disciplines reflects the

importance of writing and mathematics skills to student

success in all areas of study.

The class schedules were also analyzed in terms of the percentage of colleges offering courses in specific areas. Findings reveal that:

oo English, mathematics, history, biology, chemistry,

psychology, economics, and sociology, were offered at 90

percent or more of the colleges;

oo Political science and literature were offered at 86 percent

and 87 percent of the colleges, respectively;

oo Foreign language, philosophy, art history, engineering, and

earth science were offered at 70 to 79 percent of the

colleges; and

oo Interdisciplinary humanities, music history and

appreciation, agriculture, and interdisciplinary social

sciences are offered at only 50 to 59 percent of the

colleges. One subject, cultural anthropology, was offered by only 48 percent of the colleges.

CHANGES IN THE LIBERAL ARTS CURRICULUM OVER TIME

When these data are compared with earlier studies conducted by the Center, few substantive changes are observed in the relative positions of these major disciplines, both in terms of class sections offered and the percentage of colleges which offer them. Overall, the liberal arts curriculum is relatively stable, testimony to its endurance at the

community college despite the expansion of vocational and other noncollegiate programming.
Two notable changes, however, occurred within the disciplines, revealing the adaptability of the curriculum to emerging needs. In mathematics, courses for specific majors (such as "Mathematics for Business") decreased significantly, while the number of computer science courses increased. In foreign languages, English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes grew dramatically. Accounting for only 30 percent of all foreign language classes in 1978, they accounted for 43 percent in 1986. Today ESL is the largest single second language category, outranking even Spanish. The growth in the number of computer science and ESL courses is the most dramatic change in an otherwise stable curriculum.

INTRODUCTORY VERSUS ADVANCED CLASSES

Courses offerings within disciplines also reveal that the liberal arts curriculum has a flat structure, characterized by an abundance of introductory survey courses and a relatively small number of more advanced courses at the sophomore level. This is especially true in mathematics and English. Nineteen percent of all mathematics classes (excluding computer science) are at the remedial (pre-algebra) level, and 47 percent are at the introductory or intermediary levels (algebra through trigonometry). Thirty percent of all English composition courses can be characterized as remedial, and 60 percent of all literature courses are introductory survey classes as opposed to courses on specific genres or authors. Introductory, survey courses are predominant in many other fields as well, including physics (52 percent introductory), psychology (49 percent introductory), chemistry (67 percent introductory), sociology (56 introductory), and music and art history (over 80 percent introductory). In history and political science, half of the courses offered (54 and 53 percent respectively) are introductory classes covering the broad topics of American History or the American political system.
Much of the liberal arts curriculum, then, is designed either for remediation or as introductions to broad disciplines. Those courses that do present more specialized material often serve vocational curricula. Engineering is an extreme example. Only four percent of community college engineering classes are general or introductory in nature; most are more specialized courses--such as electronics, engineering graphics, or mechanical engineering--that serve the needs of students in various vocational programs. Other examples of liberal arts classes that serve occupational disciplines are (1) applied writing courses, such as "Writing for Business"; (2) applied mathematics courses, such as "Algebra for Technicians"; (3) science courses--such as pharmacology, biochemistry, microbiology, and anatomy--that serve nursing and other allied health students; (4) computer science courses that serve all vocational areas; and (5) other humanities and social science courses--such as ethics , social problems, or constitutional law--that prepare students for law enforcement and other business and technological areas.

The significant number of courses serving a vocational clientele demonstrates that community college liberal arts programs develop along their own lines in ways that are quite different from curricula at four-year college and universities. Though baccalaureate-granting institutions exert a significant influence on community college liberal arts curricula, vocational programs have also helped shape their development. It is thus inaccurate to use the phrase "liberal arts curriculum" interchangeably with the phrase "transfer curriculum." Summary

Data collected in the 1985 curriculum study reveal several characteristics of the liberal arts as they developed at community colleges:

oo The liberal arts classes most commonly offered are English,

mathematics, history, biology, chemistry, psychology,

economics, and sociology.

oo The liberal arts classes least commonly offered are in

agriculture, anthropology, music history and appreciation,

and interdisciplinary social sciences and humanities.

oo Spanish and English-as-a-Second-Language account for nearly

three-fourths of all language study, with ESL showing a

phenomenal increase in recent years.

oo Computer science courses have also grown rapidly.

oo Remedial English and mathematics have grown quite prominent,

accounting for 20 to 30 percent of all offerings in those

disciplines.

oo Introductory courses predominate. Those courses that are

more specialized usually serve the needs of students in

technical or allied health programs. REFSmFurther information on this and other studies of the liberal arts curriculum will be presented in the forthcoming book, The Collegiate Dimension of Community Colleges by Arthur M. Cohen and Florence B. Brawer, to be published by Jossey-Bass, Inc., in the summer of 1987. ---------- The Clearinghouse operates under OERI Contract No. 400-86-0051. The opinions expressed in this

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