Carnegie Perspectives
A different way to think about teaching and learning

Blue about the Crimson Plan for General Education

Author: Tom Ehrlich, Senior Scholar
The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

January 2006

Abstract: A pointed critique of Harvard's recent efforts to reform its core undergraduate curriculum, an issue that speaks to a lack of coherence in undergraduate education programs nationally.

Essay:

The Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences is poised to approve an embarrassing retreat in general education. The committee charged with reforming the current Core Curriculum has instead abandoned the whole idea. In its place, the committee recommends only a minimum distribution requirement for undergraduates—three courses in each of three fields. Since undergraduates will major in one of these fields, this means a distribution requirement of six courses chosen from hundreds offered by faculty in their various disciplines.

The Core Curriculum was adopted by Harvard in the 1970s with a view to ensuring that undergraduates be broadly educated in seven approaches to knowledge: Foreign Cultures, Historical Study, Literature and Arts, Moral Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, Science, and Social Analysis. Guidelines and faculty review committees were established to make certain that courses in these areas met the aims of the Core Curriculum. The goal was to ensure that students gained a general education.

Over time, the numbers of courses that qualified kept expanding and the guidelines were increasingly ignored. When Lawrence Summers became president in 2001, he made reform of the undergraduate curriculum a top priority. The committee was appointed the next year and struggled during the course of the next three years before it finally produced the proposed pitiful product. Unfortunately, it appears that the president no longer has the authority to call for more.

No general education program is perfect, and no doubt the one at Harvard had weathered and aged. But it should be replaced with a strong curriculum that is shaped by a vision of the knowledge, the skills, and the habits of mind that students need to go on learning and to be engaged and responsible leaders. Students deserve the guidance of faculty to that end. That is the philosophy of the Core Curriculum, and if its form no longer serves that function, it is the form that should be changed and not the function.

Across the country, faculty and administrators at other research universities have turned to the task of revitalizing general education. A prime example is Curriculum 2000 at Duke, led by Duke's former president and the new member of the Harvard Corporation, Nan Keohane. It requires, for example, two courses in Ethical Inquiry, while Harvard will drop its requirement in Moral Reasoning.

Some of the strongest general-education programs provide common academic experiences for undergraduates, so that classroom learning can have maximum impact across the student body as a whole. The Harvard committee looked wistfully at Columbia and Chicago as universities where all undergraduates take powerful common courses in the great books. The committee seems to support its failure to follow those institutions by noting that their programs started many decades ago. That excuse is just not good enough.

Among the troubling failures of the committee's report is that it ignores the need for students to be exposed to different pedagogies, particularly ones involving active learning, such as community service learning, project-based learning, and undergraduate research. Students learn and remember more and are better able to put their learning to use when they participate fully in their learning. Although the "chalk and talk" classroom has its place and some faculty members are superb lecturers, "stand and deliver" should not be the dominant undergraduate teaching practice.

To give the Harvard committee its due, it does encourage students to take optional courses that cross departmental boundaries and even outlines what some new interdisciplinary courses might look like. But students are likely to follow what faculty do, which too often is to focus narrowly on their disciplines, not on what a committee suggests.

Why did the committee sink to the lowest common denominator? The sad reality is that the new plan looks like it was crafted to serve the faculty and not the students. It will ensure that faculty need teach only what they want to teach, leaving it up to the students to make whatever connections they can among their courses.

The committee thoughtfully includes—along with its barren conclusions—a sparkling set of faculty and student essays that envision the possible in general education. The student essays are particularly intriguing because, in striking contrast to the committee's conclusions, several urge a common academic experience for undergraduates with a set of core requirements that provide some coherence and cohesion.

As a Harvard undergraduate, I learned from general-education courses that were shaped by another Harvard faculty curriculum committee, which crafted "Education in a Free Society" (The Red Book), and I am still learning from those courses as I prepare to return for my 50th Harvard reunion. Harvard was then a leader in undergraduate education for the country. James Conant, then president of Harvard, established that committee and was concerned when it did not call for a separate faculty to teach general education courses because he feared that no one on the faculty would take responsibility for general education. His fears are realized.

Harvard undergraduates will always do well because Harvard takes only the pick of the litter. What a shame that Harvard could not do more for such able students to further their general education. My face is crimson.

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Thomas Ehrlich is a senior scholar at Carnegie where his work focuses on enhancing moral and civic responsibility among undergraduates. From 1987 to 1994, Ehrlich was president of Indiana University. After retiring from Indiana, he joined San Francisco State University as distinguished university scholar, and held that position until 2000. In addition, he was provost at the University of Pennsylvania from 1981 to 1987 and dean of the Stanford University Law School in the 1970s. He is a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Law School, and was a law clerk for Judge Learned Hand.

51 Vista Lane
Stanford, CA 94305
http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives/