

## Back from the Brink: Harvard Gets It Right

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

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**Abstract:** The author revisits Harvard's effort to reform its general education and finds that the revised report is a dramatic improvement over its predecessor.

**Essay:**

Eighteen months ago I wrote an [eight-cylinder blast](#) for Carnegie Perspectives about the proposed new Harvard general education. In place of the Core Curriculum, adopted in the 1970s when Derek Bok was president, the faculty committee in charge—after three years of struggle—proposed to abandon the whole idea of a structured general education, and to substitute instead a minimum distribution requirement under which students could choose a few courses from hundreds offered by the faculty.

Though President Lawrence Summers had made reform of the undergraduate curriculum a top priority, the committee appointed under his leadership had produced a pitiful product that served only faculty and not students. It ensured that faculty would teach only what they wanted to teach, leaving it up to students to integrate the learning from their courses.

Fortunately, when Derek Bok was called out of retirement to serve as Harvard's interim president, he encouraged the committee in charge to step back from the brink and to try to do better. And the committee did just that. It produced a deeply thoughtful plan that has now been adopted by the Faculty of Arts & Sciences.

The new plan articulates four "overarching goals" of general education: equipping students for participation in civic life; teaching students to understand themselves in terms of traditions of art, ideas and values; preparing students to grapple with change; and developing "students' understanding of the ethical dimensions of what they say and

do." To meet those goals, students must take at least one course in each of eight subject areas: aesthetic and interpretive understanding; culture and belief; empirical and mathematical reasoning; ethical reasoning; science of living systems; science of the physical universe; societies of the world; and the United States in the world. All eight areas are defined in terms of criteria that must be met in order for courses to qualify for general-education credit. And, of course, a new "Standing Committee" is to be appointed to plan and implement the transition. (One of the pleasures of life at the Carnegie Foundation is that we have so few committees.)

During Derek Bok's interim presidency, he oversaw preparation of a second group of proposals to promote the status and quality of teaching at Harvard, while a third focused on improving science teaching for undergraduates. "Having studied the history of curricular reform with some care," writes Bok in his annual report, "I can say with confidence that, taken as a whole, the measures just described represent the most comprehensive group of proposals to improve our undergraduate program in more than a hundred years." Not bad for a year in which the same faculty had not long before voted no confidence in President Summers and ultimately forced his resignation.

I encourage all to read Bok's entire report, for it is full of sage commentary about Harvard and about higher education. He has worked at only one institution for all of his academic life, but his wise insights are relevant to colleges and universities across the country.

So what does all this say about my alma mater, where it is going, and possibly about the academy more generally? In curricular terms, Harvard has reaffirmed the place of general education as essential bedrock for a liberal education. The disposition of an inquiring mind is the hallmark of a liberal education, and the new committee report makes clear that this disposition is center stage in its curricular design. Content is important, of course. Enjoying great literature, for example, is an acquired taste, and college is the primary place of acquisition. The same is true for literacy in science. The eight areas, as the committee describes them, pulsate with potential for courses with fascinating content. But the disposition to inquiry with open-minded eagerness is the driving engine that enables undergraduates to keep on learning for the rest of their lives.

This dramatic reversal of fortunes also says quite a lot about the importance of leadership in higher education. Members of the Faculty of Arts & Sciences did not just throw up their collective hands and almost vote to adopt an "anything goes" approach to general education. They were boiling mad at President Summers, who had been the initial prime mover for a new curriculum. Unfortunately, the faculty almost chose to take out their anger not just on the president—which is understandable—but on the students and their education—which is not.

But in just a few months, Interim President Bok got the curriculum review process back on track and helped ensure that it reached a sound set of judgments. And in the process, he showed once again, as he did when he presided over the adoption of the Core Curriculum three decades ago, that leadership is critically important for any institution, and universities are no exception. Bok's kind of leadership does not mean giving orders,

but it does mean persuading and, even more important, setting a moral example of the kind of behavior that makes independent-minded, strong-willed and sometimes ornery, faculty want to find the common good.

Like any committee product, this one can be criticized, and much will depend on how the new proposals are actually implemented. But on the big things, Harvard got it right—just in time for Drew Faust, Harvard's splendid new president, to take office. My face is no longer crimson.

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*for the* ADVANCEMENT *of* TEACHING  
51 Vista Lane  
Stanford, CA 94305  
<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives/>

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