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CURRICULUM

Which Core Matters More?

Differences in definitions of quality lead to new debates over the importance of teaching practical skills versus specific knowledge



Fabrizio Costantini for The Chronicle

Mark Higbee, a history professor at Eastern Michigan U., uses a teaching method called Reacting to the Past, in which students, in effect, enter into the era at hand. "If a professor stands at the front of the classroom and talks about Plato," he says, "it doesn't mean the students are learning Plato."

By Dan Berrett | SEPTEMBER 25, 2011 ✓ PREMIUM

Potential students hoping to gauge the quality of courses at Portland State University might be forgiven for feeling a bit confused.

On the one hand, the University Studies program, which uses interdisciplinary seminars during the first two years to develop students' core skills, has been widely praised and emulated. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation has lauded the program, adopted in 1994, as "a model for

best practices in integrating assessment throughout an institution."

But the same curriculum also earned Portland State a grade of F last month from another group that rates the quality of individual college programs: the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, an advocacy group with a traditionalist bent.

Portland State is, of course, far from alone in drawing high praise from one camp of curricular observers and disapproval from another. But this dissonance in perception is emblematic of a deeper division over how higher education needs to improve. And it comes amid growing concern from scholars, policy makers, and the public over the value and rigor of higher education. While experts agree that *something* needs to be done to advance student learning, conflicts persist about exactly what that something ought to be: Should colleges' general-education programs emphasize core skills or a core curriculum?

Each side of the debate has conducted public-opinion surveys and focus groups to strengthen its case that either a core curriculum or a sharper focus on transferable skills enjoys wide support.

The approach taken by Portland State is dominant and growing. It sees the explicit cultivation of core skills, such as critical thinking, writing, and quantitative literacy, as the goal of undergraduate education. The university's six-point rubric to guide professors in grading work across courses seeks to evaluate student performance on those skills, not on

their mastery of a litany of facts and figures. "Our approach is that the content is the lens through which the learning goals are addressed," says Rowanna L. Carpenter, assessment coordinator for the University Studies program.

The virtue of that approach, the rationale goes, is that students can easily transfer skills from one area of study to another, which will help them respond better to work-force and civic demands that will emerge years after they graduate. Because core skills are the goal, rather than specific knowledge, they can be taught through many disciplines, including combinations of them. For example, first-year students at Portland State satisfy their general-education requirements with such courses as "Human/Nature," "Sustainability," and "Design and Society."

By contrast, the philosophy reflected in the trustee-council ratings favors an accepted body of rigorous content. The council's critique, while sharply worded, is not unique; it resonates with advocates for the humanities and liberal arts. According to this view, core skills like critical thinking can be difficult to measure or identify. A blogger for *The Chronicle* recently called critical thinking "a catch-all phrase with no agreed-on definition."

Students truly develop skills in critical thinking and quantitative literacy, proponents of the core curriculum say, only if they grapple with rich and time-tested ideas, not a cafeteria-style curriculum that allows them to graduate without being exposed to such foundational courses as economics, foreign language, history, mathematics, laboratory science, and literature. While nearly nine out of 10 colleges are reviewing their general-education requirements, only about one-third require a core curriculum, and there is little evidence of a widespread return to the Great Books akin to the heyday that such courses enjoyed in the middle of the last century.

False Dichotomy

The current skills-versus-content debate represents the latest in a line of curricular disputes. Recent decades have seen pitched battles over the canon and multiculturalism and the merits of a liberal education compared with a practical one.

These disagreements touch on the same basic questions: Are students learning the right things? How well will college prepare them for work and for life?

The source of those questions is a deeper sense of worry about the academic readiness of an increasingly diverse student body, says Steven Brint, a sociology professor and vice provost for undergraduate education at the University of California at Riverside.

"In some ways it's because the cohort of students became less selective," he says. "There has been for a long time, really going back to the mid-80s, a real concern about what college students are learning and what their skills are, and whether they're developing human capital or not."

In the debate over skills and content, both sides tend to dismiss the notion that their views are in conflict. Core skills and core content are linked with one another, they say, because neither can realistically be taught in isolation.

"Claiming college is about either content knowledge or critical thinking is a false dichotomy that we don't need and is actually very counterproductive," says Josipa Roksa, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Virginia and co-author of *Academically Adrift*, which looked at tests of critical-thinking skills among college students—and judged them to be lacking.

While the phrase "false dichotomy" is echoed by several people on both sides of the issue, Ms. Roksa also acknowledges that "this is a longstanding debate in higher education."

After all, to craft a syllabus or curriculum is to make choices about what gets taught, what gets measured, and what gets left out. The debate is often about which half of that dichotomy (false or not) should be emphasized more.

"A core curriculum makes it harder to avoid some confrontation with the key challenges that produce cognitive growth," says Michael B. Poliakoff, vice president for policy at the trustee council. The core curriculum, he adds, "is, in fact, all about transferable skills."

Debra Humphreys, vice president for communications at the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which touts the merits of both liberal education and a set of core skills, says it is legitimate to examine what every student should know, but she contends that the council's focus on curriculum alone doesn't go far enough.

Teaching classic literature is vital, she says, but just as important is that students learn how to transfer the skills learned in those classes. Asking students to read Shakespeare without explicitly developing their core skills, she says, "just seems to only educate someone halfway."

Broad or Deep?

The tension between skills and content overlaps with a related curricular debate: whether to favor an in-depth examination of a narrow subject or take a broader view. Two kinds of classroom experience, the American-history survey course and the thematic seminar, bring this debate into sharp contrast.

The survey is a mainstay of the core curriculum. In its ratings, the council of trustees credits colleges for their history-survey courses because only those classes, it says, have "enough chronological and topical breadth to expose students to the sweep of American history and institutions."

The thematic seminar is intended to allow students to wrestle with the complexities of a discrete bit of material, to think about it critically and from multiple angles. While students may not be taught entire swaths of historical material, supporters argue that the seminar will help them develop transferable skills and be better prepared to take on complicated subject matter in other fields.

Take Mark Higbee's history classes at Eastern Michigan University (the institution does not have a core curriculum and receives an F from the council of trustees). Mr. Higbee teaches through an acclaimed method, called Reacting to the Past, which is used at 300 institutions.

In it, students adopt the personae of figures from the curriculum and play elaborate games that can last for five weeks.

In his class on the Civil War, Mr. Higbee's first-year students read *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, a text he acknowledges is not canonical but "deceptively simple." Students take on various roles, including Mr. Douglass, Charles Dickens, and Senator John C. Calhoun, among others, and argue the critiques and defenses of slavery as they existed in 1845.

The goal, says Mr. Higbee, is not to cover the full sweep of history, but to make students probe the reasoning, prevalent at the time, that slavery was acceptable. Along the way, they build core skills like public speaking, argumentation, analysis, and writing.

The professor says that while he is sympathetic to the goals espoused by advocates of a core curriculum, he thinks the question of whether students are learning matters more. And, he says, asking students to focus intently on a few key parts of history, and to learn them in an active way, as they do in the Reacting courses, is more likely to engage them.

"If a professor stands at the front of the classroom and talks about Plato, it doesn't mean the students are learning Plato," Mr. Higbee says. "For far too long we've been arguing about what students should learn. We don't think enough about *how* they actually learn."

The council of trustees agrees that teaching and learning are important, but it says there's no way for one organization to evaluate every program. "We can't control whether someone who teaches the *Federalist Papers* really understands its complexities," says Mr. Poliakoff. "But the fact that students have experienced this document and wrestled with it can only be positive."

Even devotees of the Reacting to the Past method dispute the extent to which the underlying subject matter is important. Mark C. Carnes, a professor of history at Barnard College and creator of Reacting to the Past, says he favors using the method to teach subject matter from the core curriculum. He has helped devise Reacting courses that cover the French Revolution (in which students read Edmund Burke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau) and the roots of democracy (in which they read Plato's *Republic*, Thucydides, and Xenophon), among other subjects.

"Great texts nearly always emerge in points of intense social transformation," Mr. Carnes says. "Thus games based on them have great drama, and students, in making difficult arguments, find gold in the texts."

The underlying content matters, he says, because "if students have powerful ideas rattling around in their heads, along with strong chains of evidence, they will learn to think."

Content Drives Skill

If critical thinking is the goal of education, some scholars have asked whether some disciplines are better than others at developing it.

The prevailing answer is no, judging from *How College Affects Students*, by Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, professors of education at the University of Iowa and Pennsylvania State University, respectively. "We find little consistent evidence to suggest that one's major field of study, in and of itself, leads to different effects on general measures of critical thinking," they wrote.

But certain majors may correlate with other indicators that do lead to gains in critical thinking. Ms. Roksa and her co-author, Richard Arum, a professor of sociology and education at New York University, point in *Academically Adrift* to striking differences in critical thinking across disciplinary categories. Business and education and social-work majors score far lower on the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a test designed to measure critical thinking, than do those who major in science and engineering, social sciences, and humanities.

Why? It could be that faculty members in those broad disciplinary categories differ in how they value certain types of knowledge. They also may structure their courses in ways that develop skills and attitudes that lead to a good score on the assessment, Ms. Roksa and Mr. Arum wrote.

Finer-grained distinctions between fields were impossible to draw, because the numbers of students in each group were too small to be statistically valid, says Ms. Roksa.

But other scholars have examined narrower disciplinary categories. Mr. Brint, of Riverside, and two colleagues looked last year at analytical and critical reasoning, as well as time spent studying and academic conscientiousness, as reported by students in the University of California system. They found some sharp differences.

Science and engineering majors reported more study time than humanities and social-science majors. But among science students, those majoring in biology, chemistry, and engineering reported longer study hours than did others. "Some part of the intensity characteristic of these majors stems from the demands they make on students to master relatively complex concepts and applications," Mr. Brint and his co-authors wrote. Educators in other fields could draw techniques from biology, chemistry, and engineering to encourage gains in critical thinking, they said.

An approach that blends content and skills may be emerging as a good way to make sure that transferable skills are married to rich content, says Ms. Humphreys, of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. After all, she says, it's impossible to learn a skill, such as writing, without knowing what you are writing about.

"If you focus exclusively on skills and drain out any content," Ms. Humphreys says, "you run the risk of missing some important aspects of education."

Efforts in that vein have drawn notice on several campuses, such as among the 19 members of the New American Colleges and Universities, a group of small- to mid-sized private colleges that seek the "purposeful integration" of liberal education, practical skills, and civic engagement.

But even among those institutions, which appear to offer the kind of liberal education that traditionalists would admire, a different definition of core curriculum sometimes prevails.

Many of those colleges earn a D or an F from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

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