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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# Degrees of Ignorance

By Michael W. Clune | DECEMBER 06, 2015 ✓ PREMIUM

I was nearly 30 the first time I met an example of the new breed — a University of Michigan graduate who knew nothing beyond what was necessary to pursue his trade. It was my first job out of graduate school, and Michigan had one of the highest-ranked engineering schools in the country.

Let's call him Todd. He'd graduated a few years before. I met him at a party. He had a good job at a local engineering firm and drove a nice car. Talk turned to intellectual matters, and I soon learned that he was a creationist. He didn't seem to be aware of arguments for the other side. He was surprised to learn that Russia had fought in World War II. He'd done well in AP high-school English, which had gotten him out of having to take literature classes, and he hadn't read a book since graduating from college. "Most manuals nowadays are online," he said. Learning that I was an English professor, he asked me if I'd be willing to help him with a self-assessment document he had to write for his job. I was curious, and when a few days later his draft landed in my inbox, I discovered that his writing suffered from basic flaws.

I think even those most committed to putting vocational training at the center of higher education will agree that Michigan had failed Todd. The key Todd-prevention mechanism, which had somehow malfunctioned in this case, is known as general education. This set of courses required for all majors is designed to transmit the rudiments of critical thinking, writing, science, history, and cultural literacy to the students whom our universities are training — as Wisconsin's Gov. Scott Walker memorably put it — to meet our "work-force needs."

Photo illustration by Jonathan Barkat for The Chronicle  
Review

To begin to illustrate the threats that gen ed now faces, let me introduce another figure. We'll call him Donald. He teaches here at Case Western Reserve University, in the business school. One of our graduate students, learning of Donald's interest in the humanities, invited him to address our department colloquium. Donald laid out for us a vision of the future of education. He contrasted the "paleoteric" approach to learning, characteristic of those who labored within academic disciplines, with the "neoteric" approach being applied in advanced sectors of the business school. "Design is the new humanities," he proclaimed.

To show us the power of applied neoteric thinking, he described a breakthrough moment from a course he taught in our university's interdisciplinary general-education program, Sages ("Seminar Approach to General Education"). He and his students were wrestling with Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. The problem was that the first half of the play was dark, while the second half was happy. How to account for this? Hundreds of years of scholarship had failed to yield the answer, claimed Donald. But then the class, under the guidance of neoteric thinking, discovered that the play was a "self-renewing system." The key piece of evidence is Shakespeare's reference to springtime, which is part of another self-renewing system, the seasons.

I have nothing against designers or the way they think. But not everyone thinks in the same way. As a recent essay by Peter N. Miller in this magazine observed, "research in the design world is very closely linked to action-oriented solutions, i.e. to client needs." The problem with the effort to make such thinking the model for "the new liberal arts," Miller argued, is that an orientation toward client needs necessarily leaves out some things that have seemed important to liberal education. The past, for example.

In the discussion following Donald's presentation, a difference emerged between his design approach to Shakespeare and that of the literary scholars in the audience. Donald applied his knowledge of systems to a superficial reading of the play in order to show how it works like a kind of system. A trained Shakespearean uses his knowledge of the historical, performative, and linguistic contexts of the play to show the meanings that lie below the surface, and to trace the patterns that link one image to another. In bringing literature into the contemporary world, such a teacher preserves the shock of the old and the wonder of the work's movement through time. He encourages this movement by presenting characters and images as points of entry for students' developing imaginations.

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**There is no reason to unduly limit our students' horizons. Following your interests does not doom you to a life of poverty and struggle.**

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Thinking about the discussion afterward, I saw the possibility of fusing these two approaches. But to learn something genuinely new about the play, the designer's analysis cannot simply ignore what the literary historian knows. Such ignorance exposes us to the risk that our insights will simply be crude projections onto material we haven't tried to understand on its own terms. It would be better, I

thought, if students were trained in the basics of design by someone of Donald's expertise and experience, and in the basics of literary interpretation by a literary scholar. Trying to combine these different kinds of thinking before students are properly educated in either seems to me more likely to produce confusion than illumination.

The Sages program, which Donald champions, does a number of things well and has been particularly effective at improving student writing, largely as a result of the efforts of lecturers hired to offer writing support. But its claim to provide students with a strong gen-ed basis is weakened by the decoupling of instruction from disciplinary expertise.

Students can take such neoteric classes as "Shakespeare, Still a Hit," taught by a mathematician; or "How to Make a Leader," taught by a dentist. They can learn "The Evolution of Scientific Ideas" from a literary scholar, or "Why We Ride: Motorcycles in America" from a local architect. No one here would dream of having an art historian teach a course in the math department. The gen-ed program is the only area of the curriculum where expertise in the relevant subject matter or skills is not a requirement to teach a course.

Such courses fit the model of what the historian Harvey Graff calls faux interdisciplinarity. No one doubts that powerful insights are to be found by applying the intellectual resources of different disciplines to particular problems. But as Graff reminds us, such insights are likely to be achieved through engaging disciplinary knowledge, not bypassing it. Historians have thought a lot about how to weigh historical evidence, how to attribute causality, and how to weave a coherent narrative out of the welter of events. It's good for students to get a sense of the scale of historical problems, and to see how trained historians attempt to solve them. Biologists can educate students about the nature of scientific theories and show them the explanatory power of evolution in concrete ways that an English professor would be hard-pressed to match.

It is true that the interdisciplinary Sages program was never designed to bear the entire burden of general education on my campus. But given the practice of enabling students to fulfill gen-ed distribution requirements with credits gained from passing high-school AP exams, it is possible for our students to graduate with no other science than a Sages seminar taught by a nonscientist, and no other history than a course taught by a nonhistorian.

This phenomenon is hardly unique to my institution. Confining ourselves to the state of Ohio, I have heard from colleagues at numerous universities that administrations have responded to tight budgets and demands from legislators to focus on vocational training by slashing gen-ed requirements. A historian at a university in Cincinnati tells me that a business-school course on Wall Street and a history of Cincinnati television satisfy the gen-ed requirement for history.

The lack of exposure to different disciplines, exacerbated by counting AP credits toward distribution requirements, troubles scientists as well as humanists. Steve Rissing, a professor of biology at Ohio State University whose recent work focuses on scientific pedagogy, tells me that he doesn't believe the AP course in biology "meets the scientific-

literacy needs of a college graduate." The course appears designed to meet "the needs of future STEM majors, including and especially those preparing for medical schools. This is a fine thing to do, but is not the same as teaching scientific literacy."

Our educational system is oriented toward producing students who know how to do their jobs. But Rissing finds an important difference between the preprofessional training given to students majoring in STEM fields and the kind of scientific education that allows students to understand and appreciate the processes and effects of scientific discovery.

Aside from teaching more than the minimum required to do their jobs, courses in fields outside one's prospective major open students to career options they may not have considered. Robert B. Townsend, director of the Washington office of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, tells me that student interest in the humanities is often sparked by enrollment in introductory courses, which serve as a "vital gateway to attracting majors."

Parents alarmed by the media stereotype of English majors doomed to work in fast food might be calmed by considering the most recent AAAS study, which found that the earnings of humanities BAs were "on par with the social, behavioral, and life sciences." (While below the wages of engineers, this par is significantly above the median earnings of American families). If it were true that following your interests doomed you to a life of poverty and struggle, there might be some reason for sheltering students from the opportunity of discovering their interests. But it's not true, and there is no reason to unduly limit our students' horizons.

By surveying the various attacks on general education, one might assume that its goal — to expose students to forms of knowledge beyond their majors — is controversial. But it's not. Without exception, the professors, administrators, students, and parents I've spoken with believe that a college education should endow every graduate with a knowledge of the world beyond the terms and techniques of their chosen trade. Our colleges are failing to do this. Faux interdisciplinary courses, slashed distribution requirements, and the practice of using AP credits to fulfill those that remain are symptoms of a system that doesn't want to do the work it takes to educate students broadly and that wants to conceal this failure from the world.

A little historical context shows that the challenges that gen ed was designed to address are hardly new. Harvey Graff locates the origins of the movement in the period following World War I, when anxiety about the increasing specialization of knowledge gave rise to general curricula to provide a counterweight. John Guillory, a professor of English at New York University, writes that the spread of general-education programs after World War II was a response to "the perceived and probably also actual failure of the secondary school system to develop a curriculum that was truly substantive."

Several administrators I interviewed confirmed Guillory's point, describing inadequate high-school curricula as the

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primary reason that college-level gen ed is needed. And while full discussion of that problem lies well beyond our scope here, a number of high-school teachers have told me that national and state curricular changes over the past decade or so promise to deepen this failure.

## **thin veneer of course distribution to cover their essentially vocational education.**

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Many of the postwar gen-ed programs were based on Columbia's influential model and consisted of a sequence of extradepartmental seminars aiming to endow students with the basic knowledge believed necessary to become good citizens and full members of a flourishing civilization. Later in the 20th century, as debates began to rage about the precise content of such knowledge, the interdisciplinary courses tended to be replaced by distribution requirements, typically a minimum of three classes in each of the conventional divisions of knowledge: natural science, humanities, and social science.

In Guillory's view, the 20th-century general-education movement foundered on a basic contradiction. The aim was to educate all citizens broadly, to render them fit for democracy. But the reality was that the students given the most robust liberal education — and the broadest access to forms of knowledge and practice beyond the vocational — attended a handful of the most elite and selective colleges in the country. That contradiction was amplified by social changes in the middle class.

If 50 or 60 years ago knowledge of Proust or of ancient Greece provided valuable cultural capital for a wide range of middle-class professionals, in the "professional culture" of recent decades only those at the summit of the business world require such cultural graces. Broad knowledge is simply not necessary for the careers most middle-class students will pursue. So the masses of college students are left with a thin veneer of course distribution to cover their essentially vocational education, while the few gifted enough (or whose families are wealthy enough) to attend the most elite institutions enjoy liberal learning as a luxury.

Guillory weighed in on the matter in 2006, before the recession, in the same year I met Todd. Today we witness the erosion of even the patina of general education that Guillory criticized as inadequate. A graduate of Todd's flamboyant ignorance may well have been an aberration in 2006, accountable to some malfunction of the distribution requirements. But today Todd is becoming the standard. I would love to echo Guillory's 2006 call for a grand new "experiment" to replace the general education of the past. But today those of us who believe that all students are entitled to learning beyond the vocational find ourselves fighting to bring back even the enfeebled gen ed of the 1990s.

When I entered college, in 1993, I didn't know what to expect. Neither of my parents had attended college. In Ireland, from which we had emigrated, my grandparents could afford to send only one of their six children to school. My mother and father worked hard in America and sent me to a Roman Catholic high school, the best in the area. The school had a number of wonderful teachers, but they were overworked and exhausted. Classes consisted of lectures read out of textbooks, followed by multiple-choice exams. My parents made sure I

studied, and I got the grades and scores that enabled me to enter college with a small scholarship. "If you do well in college," I remember my mother saying, "you can get a good job. You won't have to move 11 times in four years, like we did in Ireland."

In the late summer of 1993, my college adviser sat down with me to plan my schedule. She asked me what I intended to major in. I responded by telling her I wanted to be a lawyer when I graduated. She nodded and told me I should spend at least part of my first year fulfilling my distribution requirements. She helped me select the courses: "Introduction to Biology." "Introduction to British Literature." "Introduction to World History." The names were familiar. These were high-school subjects.

But as I sat in those lecture halls and seminar rooms that first semester and listened as the professors conjured the mysteries of poems and protozoa, it didn't feel the way learning had ever felt. It didn't feel the way anything had ever felt. It felt like freedom.

Today's students are being deprived of that freedom, and we educators are to blame.

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