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The Case for a New Kind of Core

By Nicholas Lemann | NOVEMBER 27, 2016 ✓

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When I was a professional-school dean (at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism), we had no choice but to try to define the specific content of an education in our field. The premise was that if you want to practice a profession, there is a body of material you

must master, at least in the early part of your education. That perspective led me to urge, this year in *The Chronicle Review*, that undergraduate colleges move in a similar direction: a core curriculum.

Traditional undergraduate colleges have had the luxury of being far looser in the way they define what it means to be educated. Of course American undergraduate colleges vary greatly. The majority of undergraduates study skills, mainly by taking courses designed to prepare them for specific jobs, in practical-minded fields. But liberal-arts majors, who populate the country's most renowned and prestigious colleges, usually have a great deal of choice in what they study. Some colleges have no curriculum requirements at all; most impose only a light-duty distribution requirement, perhaps along with a required writing course.

My premise here is that the liberal arts are still essential to an undergraduate education. The explicitly liberal-arts colleges will continue to set the standard for what an undergraduate education means, and so will have a broad effect; and almost no college is so skills-oriented as to be willing to drop any claim that it is providing its students with more than the kind of education one could obtain at a free-standing trade school.

We Invite You To Respond

Nicholas Lemann makes the case for a new kind of core curriculum — a suite of intellectual skills that would empower students to acquire and understand information across a wide range of fields. "I'm trying to start a conversation," he writes. In that spirit, we invite you to **respond** to Lemann's vision, and to offer your own.

At a time when the great challenge for the higher-education system as a whole is to raise graduation rates, a suite of general-purpose courses, if well designed and taught, can help the many students who are struggling with the transition from high school to college. The

lesson we should take from the diminution of the liberal arts in recent years is that they have to be made stronger, clearer, and more sustainable. And as a matter of principle, the higher purpose of college — education for independent thought and active participation in democracy — can't be achieved without the liberal arts.

It's time to stop simply letting the liberal arts gradually slip away. The key to reversing their decline is to move in the direction of a core curriculum.

There are both principled and practical reasons that the core curriculum has languished. When American academic leaders of the late 19th century, like Harvard University's Charles William Eliot, pushed for an elective system to replace the curriculum of the day, which was heavy on theology and classics, it was an aspect of the exhilarating embrace of research and academic freedom as the central principles of the university.

No idea has staying power unless it develops its own political economy, though, and administratively, elective systems have a lot going for them. They avoid the difficult process of trying to get people to agree about what undergraduates should be taught. (Even high schools, where the course titles are far more standardized, have this problem — that's one reason the Common Core has run into heavy weather.) Electives permit colleges to appeal to a broad array of potential students whose academic interests vary considerably. And they are generally popular among faculty, especially research faculty, because the alternative core courses are labor-intensive and intellectually constricting.

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Pressure in the other direction, toward a more defined curriculum, however, may now finally be appearing.

The days of the seemingly limitless expansion of higher education and of minimal resistance to its cost by students and their families have been over for quite a while. This year's survey of tuition discounting released by the National Association of College and University Business Officers shows that the gap between the stated tuition and the amount students actually pay to attend private universities continues to grow, to an estimated average 48.6-percent discount for first-year students. One of the main themes of the presidential campaign was that colleges charge too much, in return for too little in the way of postgraduate economic prospects.

At the same time, six-year graduation rates remain stuck at an unacceptably low 60 percent; that is partly because many entering students just aren't prepared to navigate the world of college-level work. Elective systems don't help to solve the problem. A well-designed core

curriculum could. It could be an equalizer, providing acculturation to the university and all it has to offer.

It's true that the lifetime-earnings premium of a college degree remains so substantial that, if you have any choice in the matter, you would be nuts not to get one. But that statistic is rapidly being disaggregated by subject of study, not just by anxious parents who aren't so excited about their children's majoring in philosophy but also by the federal government's College Scorecard, which offers a field-by-field breakdown of a student's future economic prospects. The result will be further movement by students away from the traditional liberal arts and toward more practical-sounding and better-paying fields like engineering and business. That is already happening almost everywhere.

What students aren't hearing, but should, is a stronger argument — stronger, or at least more specific, than calling for "critical-thinking skills" and "education for citizenship" — for an undergraduate education that isn't overwhelmingly oriented toward employment skills that have a demonstrable payoff. Otherwise we will see continued erosion in the role of the liberal arts within undergraduate education.

What I am going to do here is propose a specific undergraduate core curriculum, aimed at first- and second-year students in a four-year program. A few stipulations: First, my main idea is not, to say the least, overwhelmingly popular in higher education. Being a professor, as I now am, rather than a dean gives me the luxury of not having to operate within the limits of any current consensus; I am trying to start a conversation. There is no danger that my ideas will be immediately enacted anywhere, so I don't feel I have to be cautious about proposing anything that hasn't been elaborately field-tested and had its effectiveness demonstrated through research. I will be pleased if readers respond with their own better ideas.

Second, my proposal is for a methods-based, rather than a canon-based, curriculum. That's partly because of the difficulty in the 21st century of selecting with confidence a limited number of books, or a specific body of knowledge, that are so universally important that everyone should have mastered them. Instead, I have tried to identify a suite of intellectual skills that together would empower a student to be able to acquire and understand information across a wide range of fields, and over the long term. These skills can be thought of as making up a tool kit that would help a student become a more empowered user of the university; they ought to help one have a more successful education and also a more successful career and life.

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I realize that in almost all cases, you can't study methods without any use of specific content: There have to be cases to which the method is applied. The idea is that the methods are in the foreground, and the content is used to support them. A course on the historical method would have to

offer.

consider some specific periods or themes, but it wouldn't be "about" them in the manner of a traditional

survey course.

More and more first-year college students are taking at least some remedial coursework. That may be because colleges are taking the problem of low completion rates more seriously, or because the quality of high-school instruction isn't improving rapidly enough. Here, I am assuming that a student enters college from a typical American high school (that is, not superb, but also not so terrible that its graduates require extensive remediation) having acquired some math and science knowledge, some history, and some experience with reading literature and writing about it.

We should try to help students make the transition to a new way of learning and a higher level of intellectual self-management. My proposed core curriculum would be aimed, in effect, at taking the student from seeing the world in two dimensions to seeing it in three: coming to understand the limits of one's own knowledge and experience and learning how to transcend them, in ways that are both rigorous and subtle, so that the world is no longer divided into a comfortable realm of things that feel true and an uncomfortable realm of the unfamiliar. This transition should empower people who have gone through it to operate with greater confidence in new environments and to avoid some of the most obvious kinds of mistakes and misunderstandings, such as making important decisions on the basis of bad or incomplete information or untested hypotheses.

The courses I am proposing are meant to be tailored to the skill they confer. Quite a few colleges around the country have recently gone through the difficult and admirable process of devising a new undergraduate liberal-arts curriculum. (The Association of American Colleges and Universities' decade-long initiative called Liberal Education and America's Promise has been a big help in promoting and helping these efforts.) Because I am operating here in the realm of the ideal rather than the practical, I can grumble that these new curricula often identify a suite of intellectual skills and require students to take courses on them, but then permit a wide array of existing courses to fulfill the requirements, which encourages declaring victory simply by pasting on a new label. Or they define the new requirements in terms of "learning outcomes" rather than course content, which puts the emphasis on devising an end-of-course assessment rather than on designing the course itself. Or they offer courses on broad interdisciplinary subjects, with words like "ethics," "values," or "justice" in their titles, rather than on the inescapably different project of identifying fundamental methods of understanding and analysis. Or they focus primarily on a way of teaching a course — these new liberal-arts curricula regularly use terms like "project-based," "problem-based," "inquiry-based," "team-based," "community-based," and "experiential" — that may be original and effective but do not necessarily tell you what the course teaches.

Selectivity is an obvious challenge in this exercise. I have arbitrarily limited my core curriculum to eight one-semester courses, which would amount to no more than half of an undergraduate education, so it would not eliminate the ability to have a major or to choose

elective courses. Here goes:

Information Acquisition

Google is a life-changing tool that we all use, but it doesn't overlap perfectly with one of the core methodological skills of college students, which is locating usable information. To do that well, one has to know something about the sociology of knowledge — that is, who creates information, under what conditions, subject to what distorting pressures. It is pretty easy to cure students of the idea that everything they encounter online, or elsewhere, is true; a more challenging and important task is communicating a basic typology of information (academic, documentary, journalistic, governmental, crowdsourced, and so on) along with the idea that information isn't cleanly divided into true and false, but is instead created through constant contention and revision. Some of the purpose of this course would be to give students a basic user's guide to higher-education study: how to use libraries and online databases, how to distinguish among a multiplicity of sources, especially online, and how to perform a basic literature review. The kind of assignments that might go with this course would ask students to write a basic summary of what's known about a subject, or to adjudicate between two widespread conflicting claims.

Cause and Effect

This is something like a course in the basics of the scientific method, aimed at people who aren't necessarily going into science. The core thinking process entails stating what question you're trying to answer, then establishing a hypothesis as to what the answer might be, then finding a way to test the hypothesis by gathering material that would settle its degree of trustworthiness. The title of the course refers to the idea that causation is a key concept in almost all fields of inquiry, which is too often used sloppily or instinctively, with unfortunate results. One could teach this course using primarily scientific examples, but that isn't strictly necessary; for years, I have been teaching a version of it to journalists, using news stories as the main material. What might explain, for example, why violent crime has decreased so much more in New York City than in Chicago? What's important is conveying the idea that making inferences is a skill, and that a series of thinking techniques is powerfully helpful in performing it.

Interpretation

The focus here is on close reading of texts, a fundamental academic skill that students may have missed in high school, that they will need to succeed in college, and that will also prove to be both practically helpful and emotionally enriching as they go through life. There are a number of ways to teach it from different disciplines, which could fruitfully be combined in the course: literary reading, analytic reading, and so on. Therefore this course could have elements of an English class, or a social-science class, or a class in law or religious studies. The main idea is to learn to read for meaning, for subtlety, for contradiction and ambiguity, and for connection to other texts. Some of the same skills could potentially be applied to

material from film or drama. Assignments in this course would be traditional analytic papers, whether on the full meaning of a biblical passage or the governing principles embedded in the U.S. Constitution.

Numeracy

I am persuaded by the broad argument that the political scientist Andrew Hacker makes (talking about elementary and secondary school rather than college) in *The Math Myth and Other STEM Delusions* (The New Press, 2015). For purposes of general education, not the specific education of people going into fields that require mathematics, colleges should require undergraduates to take a course that familiarizes them with the quantitative world. It is deeply present in just about everything, including not-obviously-scientific realms like politics and government. This need not be a math course per se. Hacker suggests pulling examples out of everyday life that illustrate the broad applicability of being able to think confidently about numbers — poll results, sports statistics, stock-market indicators, government economic data (these examples are mine, not Hacker's). The idea is to make students understand how numbers are generated, how to compare quantities from different realms, and some of the basic concepts underlying probability and statistics.

Perspective

Most people, including students entering college, believe that the world as it appears to them and the people around them is the world as it is. It is crucial, and not easy, to teach people that they actually have a particular perspective, which inescapably has its limits — and then to help them understand that other people experience the world profoundly differently, which ought to be understood rather than dismissed. This project is central to a number of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, literature, psychology, and even the client-oriented aspects of professional education, any of which might be brought in. Courses on diversity or understanding other cultures would have some overlap with what I am proposing, but I worry that those sometimes take the edge off the complexity and difficulty of the subject by communicating the idea that through tolerance, respect, and understanding, a person can successfully adopt a benign, universal perspective that can honor all other perspectives. That's appealing, but it's important not to let students believe that their own viewpoint can ever escape being limited in important ways, or that fundamental conflicts between perspectives can ever be entirely avoided.

The Language of Form

The course title is a slightly modified version of a term that the digital humanist Johanna Drucker uses in *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production* (Harvard University Press, 2014). She focuses on how we increasingly get our information in the form of visual displays rather than texts or numbers. She explores mainly a deep understanding of charts and graphs, which are ubiquitous in the life of every educated person, but the method could be extended to the third dimension so that questions of how space and volume are arranged could also be considered. This course would have elements of design, architecture, planning, art, and even ecology. I want to distinguish it, though, from "design thinking," as

promoted at the Stanford d.school and elsewhere, which understands design not as encompassing everything visual and volumetric, but as more specifically about the process of making things. This should be a course in intelligently seeing and producing visual information, not in prototyping products and training people to plan and iterate projects in teams, which is useful but less universal than what I have in mind.

Thinking in Time

This, to some extent, is a course on the historical method, but it's meant to do more than teach people to do historical research per se. To most students arriving at college, the past often seems safer than it actually was, outcomes more inevitable than they were, and operative assumptions closer to the ones we use today. Historical thinking is a powerful way of opening people's minds to unfamiliar possibilities and ways of thinking, a process central to a liberal education. It can make students see that everything could have turned out differently, that individual people always operate within social, economic, and cultural contexts. One could teach such a course by focusing on a period in history, but that wouldn't be strictly necessary, and the primary aim would not be to teach students the procession of significant events in a particular time and place. Similarly, it would be a good idea to study original historical documents in this course, but that's a means to an end, not the end itself.

Argument

Back in the 19th century, when undergraduate core curricula were the rule rather than the exception, practically everybody had to take a course in rhetoric or oratory. The requirement often had roots in the colleges' original mission of training ministers, and it usually vanished with the advent of the elective system. This course would aim to revive the tradition by teaching students how to make a compelling and analytically sound argument, both written and spoken (and probably also, inevitably, in PowerPoint). It is an endeavor with centuries of interesting thought behind it, so one can imagine the course drawing on philosophy, law, theology, even drama — with the opportunity to consider exemplary arguments from the past. It should be obvious that the assignments would ask students to practice the skills the course is teaching them, in writing and in performance.

What these courses have in common is a primary commitment to teaching the rigorous (and also properly humble) pursuit of knowledge. They therefore go against the grain of assumptions that are widely held in higher education today, including that entering students don't need such a high level of direction, and that the idea that one can be taught to get closer to the truth of a situation is too problematic to justify a tight embrace. They put methods above subject-matter knowledge in the highest place of honor, and they treat the way material is taught as subsidiary to what is taught.

There are excellent reasons for why core-curriculum discussions are difficult and unpopular, and why methods are not an explicit or primary focus of undergraduate education. But the result is that the balance has shifted too far away from the kind of

material I have proposed here. I hope it will at least begin to shift back. That would make liberal education stronger and more sustainable.

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