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What Should Graduates Know?

By Nicholas Lemann | JANUARY 08, 2016 ✓ PREMIUM



Illustration by Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle Review

Ten years ago, I was teaching the first cohort of students in a newly designed professional master's-degree program at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. From the earliest days of journalism education in universities, a never-ending debate has pitted an approach that emphasizes skills associated with various formats for presenting the news against one that stresses understanding of the complex subjects about which journalists are supposed to inform the public. Our program was meant to represent a pendulum swing in the latter direction.

We left in place our established master's-of-science program, which focuses on skills. In stages, we reworked its

curriculum to introduce the new skills associated with the digital revolution in journalism. Both of our main degree programs are based on courses that all students are required to take, but our master's of arts offers no courses on the various ways of presenting news. It focuses on a "journalistic method" of on-the-fly epistemology; on teaching students to understand and write about complicated and important subjects for a general public; and on a thesis project that entails substantial original research, often done through reporting abroad. We teach statistical literacy and state formation, monetary policy and ethnography, literature reviews and public health.

If you're reading this, you probably don't have to be persuaded that those studies should be part of the equipment that journalists take into the world. But that would still be a minority position within journalism itself. And it isn't just in journalism education where arguments pitting employment-related skills against understanding and complex thinking take place, but, also increasingly, throughout universities.

Professional schools are naturally contested ground, because by definition they are not purely academic institutions. But the argument about what should be taught is now also taking place in undergraduate education — at least in the liberal arts, the part of undergraduate education that wasn't always mainly devoted to skills instruction. What to teach and how to teach it are likely to become central issues for colleges in a way that they haven't been for a long time.

Professional schools first. Each of them has had to find a way not only to feel like part of the larger enterprise of the university, but also to demonstrate a tangible career value to prospective students and to employers. At schools that train people for fields that require licensing, like law and medicine, what's taught tends to be bound up in legal requirements and is therefore not overly fluid. Journalism schools are more like business or public-policy schools in being able to change quickly and substantially, if that seems to be required, and in having to justify their utility to students who are free to enter the field without taking a degree.

Professional education usually migrated into universities from apprenticeship systems in the workplace. In the early going, the apprenticeship model seemed appropriate: Hire veteran practitioners as faculty members; try to replicate a practice environment as much as possible; focus on conferring the skills that students would most likely be using in their first jobs. Employers often like that model because, in effect, it puts them in charge of what happens in professional schools: The schools' mission is to emulate what employers are doing.

In most cases, forces within universities, like the requirement that faculty members produce academic research, have over the years moved professional schools away from the apprenticeship model. Such forces, however, have had remarkably little effect on journalism schools. A hundred years ago, when journalism education was just beginning, state press associations relentlessly and effectively lobbied for a focus on basic news reporting and writing, with little or no intellectual or analytic content.

Today the argument that journalism schools have to embrace the digital revolution has led to a new, innovative-sounding version of the venerable call for more practical skills and less of anything that can be caricatured as "academic." The most recent major report on the future of journalism education, from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, imagines an ideal professional program that privileges "currency" far more than the intellectual and research orientation of its home university and, in that spirit, sharply reduces its commitment to permanent faculty. It's a program that would focus primarily on "the capacity to identify and master emerging market trends and media technologies and to integrate them quickly into journalistic work" and would strive for "a startup, digital-first program with all new systems, structures and operating assumptions." It's hard to imagine that kind of rhetoric being applied to professional education in, say, law, medicine, or architecture.

Columbia's journalism school opened, in 1912, firmly in the academic camp, which was in accordance with the wishes of its founding donor, Joseph Pulitzer, who in 1904 wrote an

essay, "The College of Journalism," exhorting it to scour disciplines like law, statistics, economics, sociology, history, and the physical sciences and to "divert, deflect, extract, concentrate, specialize them for the journalist as a specialist." The most influential figure on the committee that devised Columbia's curriculum was the historian Charles A. Beard, who at first personally taught journalists-in-training how to cover politics. But within a few years, Beard had quit Columbia over its trustees' interference with academic freedom, and the journalism school had abandoned this approach. Instead it set up a large newsroom where the students would arrive and sit at their desks only until they were dispatched by their teachers to go out and cover news stories around New York City.

All in all, setting up the master's-of-arts program has been a happy adventure, beginning with the year or two we spent inventing a curriculum and then planning the courses, one by one, with the help of colleagues elsewhere at Columbia and outside the university. We have graduated hundreds of students from all over the world, whose work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Slate*, *The New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, the *PBS NewsHour*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Time*, *Frontline*, *Fortune*, and many other places (including *The Chronicle*). They have written acclaimed books, made documentary films, and have helped start such ventures as the reborn *The Caravan*, the first English-language magazine of long-form journalism in India, and the Tehran Bureau, the leading dedicated source for independent news about Iran. We are demonstrably not impractically academic.

Our experience obviously has something in common with that of other professional schools. Almost all of them require some kind of set curriculum for entering students. Business students must take accounting and finance; medical students, anatomy and biochemistry; law students, contracts and civil procedure. The lineup varies from

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institution to institution, but every school, in every professional realm, has to propose a set of materials that it considers essential for people entering the profession. Usually these required courses are not simply a map of the way professional practice is organized; instead of having been conceived by reasoning backward from the categories the profession uses to organize its work, they are reasoned forward from capabilities, ways of thinking, and a body of knowledge that the school believes are foundational for professionals who will be practicing under many conditions over a long time. A big law firm, for example, will almost certainly have a mergers-and-acquisitions department, but a law student won't be able to take a mergers-and-acquisitions course until after having completed a less practice-specific, more conceptual first-year curriculum.

I don't mean to make it sound as if questions about what to teach in professional schools have been settled. Every dean knows that they are a matter of contention, course by course and in the broader sense of striking the proper balance between more academic and more practice-oriented material. Politically it is a challenge to create consensus among groups

with often quite different visions of what the school should be: faculty, students, alumni, employers, and the outside bodies that accredit and rate the schools. Should medical schools teach family medicine? Business schools entrepreneurship or more technical material? Should law schools hire faculty members who have Ph.D.s in other fields? You wouldn't want professional schools to stop having those kinds of arguments.

That these remain openly contentious issues is a contrast with the situation in undergraduate education, where the conversation about the content of education is much less developed. Colleges, which are increasingly regarded by the people paying for them as proto-professional schools, have something to learn from professional schools about better defining themselves academically.

The great majority of college students in the United States are taking mainly skills courses, which are aimed at getting them jobs in white-collar fields that are not the "ancient and honorable professions" that college graduates once looked to. They are studying to be providers of human-resource services, bookkeepers, computer programmers, early-childhood educators, and so on, and much of their coursework pertains to their career aspirations.

In the better-resourced, more-selective colleges that a lucky minority of students attend, the curriculum is usually both less practical and less prescribed. A few, like Columbia, the University of Chicago, and St. John's College, have a core curriculum required of all students; a few, like Amherst College and Brown University, have no specific curriculum requirements; most have a fairly light-duty distribution requirement, asking students to take a small number of courses in whichever of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences aren't their major field of study. As a result, most selective institutions, private and public, that emphasize an undergraduate liberal-arts education have gotten themselves off the hook of having to do what professional schools do: decide what all degree recipients must have learned.

One reason that more-structured undergraduate education is so rare is that it doesn't have an organized constituency. Students generally like having the freedom to choose to study whatever they want, from a large menu of options. Faculty members, especially in research universities, are rarely eager to take time away from their own research to engage in the intensive work of developing core courses; they often don't see direct involvement in undergraduate education as a crucial element in their work. Administrators are increasingly caught up in the management of "student life," work that rests on an understanding of college as a community, a site of maturation, where purely academic questions are secondary. Significantly, the most spirited discussion of what's taught in college is about getting more topics about diversity into courses, and adding more courses about diversity. In other words, it's occurring in response to a student movement that began in another realm, not because what's taught is the obvious main topic of discussion.

Harvard University provides an interesting example of the difficulty of establishing an undergraduate curriculum, even in a supremely established and well-off institution that strongly feels it needs one. Charles William Eliot, Harvard's president from 1869 to 1909,

established an elective system, which freed undergraduates to take courses in any field, in the 1880s, as one element in a great institutional transition to the research-university model. After the Second World War, the college established a General Education program out of a felt need to give more definition to what it meant to have a Harvard education, so that a student's learning could not be limited to one field of study. Over the years, that system became so diffuse that, by the late 1970s, the university replaced it with a core curriculum. But by the turn of the 21st century, that was thought to be so loosely defined that the university began a long, elaborate effort to replace the core with a new system, known by the old name of General Education, which was meant to connect academic study more vividly to the real world. It began in 2007. Last spring a faculty committee's highly critical review of Gen Ed reported that it "is failing on a variety of fronts," including allowing students to fulfill the requirements by choosing from a list so extensive — 574 courses! — that maintaining the overall aims of the program was impossible. So another major revision of the undergraduate curriculum is in the offing.

For colleges less fortunate than Harvard, the impulse to avoid taking on the difficult task of establishing a more-structured undergraduate curriculum can impose real costs over the long term. Despite the nearly ubiquitous rhetoric about skyrocketing tuition, the evidence seems to indicate that colleges' pricing power is eroding significantly. The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities' annual tuition survey shows that the size of the annual increases in stated tuition peaked in the early 1980s and has been declining ever since; the most recent survey showed an average annual increase of 3.9 percent, the lowest in 40 years. And that's the stated price, not what students actually pay. The latest annual survey conducted by the National Association of College and University Business Officers, released in August, shows that at the 411 participating colleges, the average tuition-discount rate for first-year students was 48 percent, up from 38 percent 10 years ago. Discounting is rising more rapidly than published tuition, so tuition revenue at many private institutions may be falling. Public colleges have their own financial woes because of budget cuts and tuition caps imposed by state legislatures.

If a college is presenting itself to prospective students and their families as a living environment, as much as or more than an academic experience, it has to try to take on the implied cost: pleasant dormitories, athletics facilities, counseling services. And if it is presenting itself as an institution offering a wide variety of options from which students can select, it has to maintain a large, expensive set of departments and courses. At many colleges, those pressures set off a dynamic of relentless competition for students with peer institutions that are not obviously very different; that, in turn, has increased the importance of ratings systems and tuition discounting. The harder it is to state your intellectual mission, the more your customers must choose on the basis of generic price and quality comparisons.

If colleges can't or don't want to clearly define what they're about academically, they are left unarmed against what has become the intense pressure to define undergraduate education in terms of acquiring only those skills that have an obvious, immediate, practical applicability and will enhance a graduate's chances of employment. Students, parents,

many employers, and state governments tend to push colleges in this direction. Recently the Obama administration added to the pressure by publishing the College Scorecard, which provides data on institutions and majors according to future earnings potential. It's true that some majors are associated with higher incomes than others, but the evidence we have about what accounts for the substantial overall economic value of a college degree over a lifetime indicates that it is a payoff for the development of "cognitive skills" rather than for specific job skills or credentials — a payoff that manifests itself regardless of what a student learned.

Confidence that a college education will pay off no matter what it provides academically seems misplaced. Against the felt need of students and their families to get something intellectually specific out of college, heartfelt commencement speeches about how important a broad humanistic education is to good citizenship and a meaningful life make for a pretty weak countervailing force.

It would be disingenuous for me to argue that what I believe colleges should do — move in the direction of a more defined curriculum, with a concomitant greater emphasis on teaching as a primary faculty responsibility — is merely an unavoidable necessity. But I do believe that colleges will find it more and more difficult to stay the present course, which drive costs ever higher and revenues ever lower. Far better to go through a considered, openhearted process of deciding what you stand for academically and where you want to be strongest, ensure that every student's experience encompasses that, and use it as the way you present yourself to the world.

Spending 10 years as a professional-school dean preoccupied with the question of what the suite of requirements should be for students habituated me to thinking about curriculum, and I have been noodling around with ideas about undergraduate education. What would produce a version of what it means to be a college graduate, regardless of one's major, that would be as clear and strong as stipulating what it means to be a professional-school graduate? My own preference is to create a canon of methods rather than a canon of specific knowledge or of great books — that is, to define, develop, and require instruction around a set of master skills that together would make one an educated, intellectually empowered, morally aware person.

Here is a quick list of possibilities: Rigorous interpretation of meaning, taught mainly through close reading of texts. Numeracy, including basic statistical literacy. Pattern and context recognition. Developing and stating an argument, in spoken and written form. Visual and spatial grammar and logic. Understanding how information is produced, how to locate it, and how much faith to put in it. Empathetic understanding of other people and other cultures. Learning to explore rigorously the relationship between cause and effect and to draw plausible inferences. I should emphasize that I am advocating developing courses that are specifically aimed at creating those capabilities, rather than declaring that existing courses that are notionally about something else will confer them.

As a journalist, as a teacher, and as an administrator, I've had a sometimes overwhelming past 10 or 15 years as I've watched my original profession being subjected to changes more rapid and more pervasive than I would have thought possible. Can that happen to colleges and universities? I don't think so — universities offer a far more varied suite of experiences, which they provide mainly in person rather than as pure transmitted information — but the lesson of my experience in journalism is that anticipating change leaves you in much better shape than betting that it won't ever come and then having to react under duress. In undergraduate education, the best way to anticipate change would be to define, state, and put in effect a clear academic mission.

Nicholas Lemann is a professor of journalism and dean emeritus at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, and a staff writer for The New Yorker. He is a member of the Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education, sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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